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Moving Images: India on British Screens, 1917-1947

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Doctor of Philosophy

History

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Moving Images: India on British Screens, 1917-1947

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B.Phil., University of Pittsburgh, 2004  
M.A., Emory University, 2008

Advisor: Marcus Collins, Ph.D.  
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An abstract of  
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the  
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## Abstract

### Moving Images: India on British Screens, 1917-1947 By Jacqueline Audrey Gold

This thesis explores British responses to films about India in the last thirty years before India achieved its independence. Recent scholarship argues that British interest in the empire remained relatively stable from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Yet discussions about India films—the term I use to describe films that portrayed India to British audiences—suggest that the period after the First World War was a moment of radical revision of the nineteenth-century themes of empire. Using a number different sources—letters to film magazines, contemporary studies of cinemagoing, film reviews, official records, script revisions, and even films themselves—this thesis unpacks responses from British audiences to studio films, newsreels, and colonial home movies.

Discussions about India films reveal that imperial themes were not always at the center of how British audiences interpreted these films. They demonstrate the extent to which British imperial culture was not entirely of Britain's own making in the twentieth century as extra-imperial forces—most notably the American film industry—became significant in shaping British culture. And they highlight shifting understandings of the special relationship between Britain and India, shifting views on the relationship between Britain and the United States, and shifting visions for Britain's place on the world stage in the twentieth century. This thesis argues that if films about India reused familiar nineteenth-century themes, discussions of India films suggest that audiences interpreted those themes in new ways, ones that already anticipated a post-imperial world.

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## Acknowledgements

In some ways I began writing these acknowledgements more than twenty years ago, standing in front of my bedroom mirror, practicing my Academy Award and Grammy acceptance speeches. My utter lack of talent as an actress (in spite of all my parents' encouragements) and my absolute tone-deafness (which both of my parents accepted, though never mentioned) means that this tribute must come in a much more private medium, one in which I've always been most comfortable. While it may be quieter, it is no less heartfelt.

Thanks first to my dedicated advisors, Marcus Collins and Pamela Scully. It's thanks to Marcus's championing that I found a home at Emory and that everything since has been possible. He may well know this dissertation better than I do, having read it in every form it has taken in the past eight years, including several forms that I would dearly like to forget. Thank you, Marcus, for your confidence in my abilities from the beginning, and thank you for seeing this project all the way to the end with me. Thank you for all the time you've taken, for your thoughtful reflections over the years, and for your honesty, even when I know it would have been much easier to tell me what I wanted to hear. Thank you for your dedication and loyalty; you have gone above and beyond what I could have rightfully asked of you as an advisor.

I first met Pamela in my first semester of graduate school, a time when I required more patience and softer kid gloves than almost any other in my life. Pamela's rigor as a scholar, her warmth, and her boundless energy inspire me, and her belief in my work helped keep me motivated in those first overwhelming months. (Who else could have had the patience to guide me through my first readings of Michel Foucault, Gayatri Spivak, and Adrienne Rich, all in less than two months?) That seminar absolutely

reshaped my research plans, and her mentorship since has been seminal in my development as a scholar. Thank you, Pamela, for your support and for your enthusiasm, and thank you for being willing to take on the role of co-chair on this project.

Thanks to my committee members, Matthew Bernstein and Gyan Pandey, who thoughtfully responded to my many questions and to numerous drafts of this thesis over the past several years. Thanks, too, for their seemingly endless patience, not only in pushing my research and analysis forward, but also in being willing to bridge the distance between Atlanta, San Diego, and most recently, North Carolina.

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Thanks to the many wonderful teachers I met in my years at the University of Pittsburgh, particularly Dr. Bernie Hagerty. At the ripe age of eighteen, I found myself—by either pure dumb luck or cosmic fate—in his Western Civilization lecture in my very first semester of college, and it proved to be a meeting that completely changed my life. I have yet to meet a more passionate and inspiring teacher, and there are still days when I would give anything to be able to sit in one of his lecture halls for a few hours. I mimic him in my own classrooms more than I should probably admit. (Though I personally find his incredibly powerful hushed excitement hard to master.) Thank you for setting me on this path, for reading and commenting on drafts of this thesis, for your unflinching encouragement, and for your friendship and mentorship in the past thirteen years. You have made all the difference in my life.

There have been few moments as frightening as stepping off the elevator on the second floor of Bowden Hall for the first meeting of my grad school cohort. There has been no one in my life who could have made me feel as immediately comfortable as the girl standing at the end of the hallway—Kelly Erby Dumbauld. You had me at “state school,” Erby. Thank you for helping make those ATL years magical—the many (many) beers, the many (many) dates at the Majestic (and Chipotle, Felini’s, Brewhouse, Brickstore, Moe’s & Joe’s, Neighbor’s, and Manuel’s), the many (many) trips to buy 3-for-2 earrings on stipend day, the many (many) deep conversations across your kitchen counter. Thank you for never being more than a phone call or a text message away during the craziness since. And thank you for always understanding me, even when I’m sure no does. In my darkest moments, I knew that if nothing else came of my time at Emory, your friendship would have been enough to make the whole thing worthwhile.



Thanks to my husband, Michael, who has lived with this project for almost as long as I have and whose support in the past twelve years has meant more than I could ever possibly express to him. We could not have chosen two more different career paths; what they share in common is that both require an almost infinite amount of patience, support, flexibility, and faith from our partners. It turns out my husband has all of these in spades. Thank you for keeping me grounded and turned in the right direction, even when I desperately wanted to retreat. Thank you for learning to say exactly the right thing at the right time. It has saved me more times than you know. Thank you for everything that's wonderful about our lives together and for all the scary and amazing things that will come as we enter this next phase. And yes, this means you can finally read it, Jitters!

My last thanks must go to my parents, who I think envisioned this day long before I ever could and who always knew I would get here, even when I doubted it. I've often wondered if all children born to older parents have an innate comfort with history; we live with an unusually intimate connection to the past. Thanks to my father, Sam, who taught me from my earliest years that a book is the most beautiful, thoughtful gift anyone can receive and whose Valentine's Day gifts still have pride of place on the bookshelves in my home. It's also thanks to him that Gene Kelly was one of my first loves, that I sometimes still wake up singing "Oh! How I Hate to Get up in the Morning," and that I know the lyrics to almost every one of Rodgers's and Hammerstein's songs. (It's just a fair trade that I got to introduce him to *Sesame Street*, "Goofus and Gallant," and *Seinfeld*.) Thanks, Dad, for the many Sunday morning conversations that reminded me that it was still too soon to give up. As usual, you were right.

It is a sign of her absolute devotion that no one in my life will be hurt or offended that I save my last and most heartfelt thanks for my mother, Rose. Everything wonderful in my life, including the completion of this thesis, has been possible because of her support and selflessness. She has been my cheerleader, my prison guard, my therapist, my financial planner, my personal organizer, my travel companion, and my dearest friend for as long as I can remember. Thank you, Mom, for pushing me, even when it meant we butted heads, and thank you for knowing when what I really needed was just a good cry. You have given me the best role model for what a mother should be, though I'm not sure that I can ever live up to your example. You are in every single page of what follows. I can only hope that someday I'll find a way to repay you.

## **Moving Images: India on British Screens, 1917-1947**

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## Introduction

The final days of Britain's Indian empire have left historians of the twentieth century with something of a mystery. In 1947 India won its independence from Britain. A colony that had held unparalleled significance in the British Empire from the eighteenth century, India was the lynchpin of the empire in economic, strategic, and symbolic terms. At stake in Indian independence was more than the loss of a single colony; contemporaries feared that it would mark the unavoidable dissolution of the entire British empire and the ruin of Britain itself.<sup>1</sup> Much of the recent scholarship on the British empire has emphasized its importance in twentieth-century British culture and society, an influence that did not diminish even as the empire itself was in decline. But if the empire played such a key role in British life, the first major instance of decolonization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century seemed to elicit little response from the vast majority of the British public.

This thesis considers debates circulating around films about India in the last thirty years before Indian independence. It argues that while the empire remained a relevant subject in twentieth-century British culture and society, the British had already begun to conceive of India outside the binary division of colonizer and colonized. In 1939, 26 percent of Britons surveyed by Gallup thought that India should receive its independence

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, even before Indian independence loomed large on Britain's political horizon, fears of what the loss of India might mean to Britain weighed heavily on political leaders. Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India from 1899 to 1905 claimed in 1901, "As long as we rule India we are the greatest power in the world. If we lose it we shall drop straightaway to a third-rate power." In 1902, Colonel W. R. Robertson argued that "in fighting for India, England will be fighting for her imperial existence." In 1930, Winston Churchill had warned that Indian independence would inevitably mean ruin for Britain's textile industry and would produce uncontrollable famine in places like Lancashire. In 1947 the Attlee Labour government feared that Indian independence "might be regarded as the beginning of the liquidation of the British empire," and concern grew that Labour would irrevocably lose electoral support if India gained independence under their watch. See David Dilks, *Curzon in India* (London: Hard-Davis, 1969), 177; Keith Jeffrey, *The British Army and the Crisis of Empire, 1918-22* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1984), 33; Stuart Ward's Introduction to Ward, ed, *British Culture at the End of Empire* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 6.

during the war; 51 percent thought that it should wait but only until the end of the war.<sup>2</sup> By March of 1942, 31 percent believed that India should be granted independence before the end of the war, 41 percent believed it should wait until the end of the war, and only two percent believed that India should remain a permanent British colony.<sup>3</sup>

If, as recent scholarship argues, British interest in the empire remained relatively stable from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, discussions around India films—the term I use to describe films that depicted India to British audiences—suggests that the period after the First World War was a moment of radical revision, one in which extra-imperial forces—most notably the American film industry—became a significant force in shaping British imperial culture. The term “India films” comes in part from film historian H. Mark Glancy’s concept of “British” films. Glancy identifies “British” films as those primarily produced by American companies (which made them “British” rather than British), “based on British source material or set in Britain,” having “a significant number of British personnel among the credits,” and taking an idyllic, nostalgic stance towards Britain.<sup>4</sup> India films were films about or set in India, produced primarily by European and American studios (making them India films as opposed to Indian films), and often with European and American audiences in mind.

If Rider Haggard novels and missionary reports were the main sources of information on the empire in the nineteenth century, films became the primary source of information in the twentieth.<sup>5</sup> Eighty percent of the working class between the ages of 15

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<sup>2</sup> George H. Gallup, *The Gallup International Public Opinion Polls, Great Britain, 1937-1975* (New York: Random House, 1976), 25.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>4</sup> See H. Mark Glancy, *When Hollywood Loved Britain: The Hollywood “British” Film, 1939-1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 1-4.

<sup>5</sup> For work done on nineteenth-century culture and empire see, for example, Jeffrey Richards, ed., *Imperialism and Juvenile Literature* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1989), Susan Thorne,

and 35, for example, saw newsreels at least once a week.<sup>6</sup> Annual admissions to popular films in 1934 were 903 million and continued to rise for the next six years, even in the face of economic crisis and global war.<sup>7</sup> In January 1938, for example, 84 percent of those polled by Gallup revealed that they had been to the movies at least once within the past month; 47 percent claimed to attend the cinema at least once a week or every ten days.<sup>8</sup> In fact, 26 percent had been to the cinema within the past week, and fifteen percent had gone within the previous three days.<sup>9</sup> While the most frequent audiences were young and working class, cinemagoing was a widespread practice for much of the British population in the interwar and war years.

Cultural historian John MacKenzie has argued that the empire remained a relevant cultural topic in the first half of the twentieth century because it offered promises of stability and continued relevance in a period marked by instability, recession, and real or imagined decline.<sup>10</sup> Yet conversations taking place around India films destabilize accepted wisdom about how the nineteenth-century themes of empire—the White Man’s Burden, the treacherous Indian, the eagerly assimilationist ‘Babu,’ and the empire as a site for male adventure, a source of unquestioning patriotic pride, and a singularly national project—circulated in the last thirty years before Indian independence. India films may seem unanimous in envisioning India as a site of British power and patriotism,

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*Congregational Missions and the Making of an Imperial Culture in Nineteenth Century England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), and Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830-1867* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002)

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Pronay, “The Newsreels,” in Paul Smith, ed, *The Historian and Film* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain, 1930-1939* (Boston: Routledge & K. Paul, 1984), 18.

<sup>8</sup> Gallup, 7.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> John MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion, 1880-1960* (Dover, NH: Manchester University Press, 1984).

yet this does not accurately represent how British audiences interpreted these films.

Discussions about India films demonstrate the lack of a single-minded British vision of India and the empire.

My title, *Moving Images*, reflects the unstable nature of these film texts. They moved to and through British cinemas from around the globe. They often attempted to move public opinion. Their messages shifted as audiences reinterpreted their meanings in order to reflect dynamic discussions about the role of India and the empire in the twentieth century. And ultimately, discussions around these moving images revealed an evolving image of the special relationships between Britain and India, Britain and America, and Britain's place on the world stage.

### **Studies of British Imperial Culture**

This study grows out of the scholarship on British imperial culture that has developed over the course of the last twenty years. The publication of Edward Said's ground-breaking *Orientalism* in 1978 complemented a trend already taking place in British historiography, a shift from the sociological studies that dominated the 1970s and early 1980s to a focus on cultural production, texts, and discourses. Said's focus on the cultural, as opposed to political or economic, impetus for empire changed the field significantly. The combined influence of Said's insistence on the centrality of Orientalism and imperialism to European society and an increasing focus on discourses, which drew heavily on the work of Michel Foucault, paved the way in the 1990s for what has been called the 'new imperial history.' In fact in many ways the imperial turn of the 1990s is difficult to disengage from a concomitant 'cultural turn' of the same period.

At its core the new imperial history sought to place ‘the metropole’ and ‘the periphery’ in the same analytic frame in order to demonstrate that Britain and its empire were mutually constitutive. Catherine Hall, for example, demonstrated that the very notion of “Englishness” was neither a timeless concept nor one developed in isolation in England, and that the definition of English citizenship codified in the Reform Bill of 1867—one that was exclusively white and male—was a definition debated and reconstructed over time and in relation to experience and contact with the wider world of the empire.<sup>11</sup> Mrinalini Sinha explored how the notion of English manhood and masculinity came to be defined and reified as against a notion of Indian effeminacy in the nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> Anne McClintock demonstrated the role of the empire in circumscribing such quotidian practices as bathing and housekeeping and the role of such practices in creating consumer demand for new products seen as defining English households and the domestic sphere.<sup>13</sup> Antoinette Burton showed how British feminists used imperial debates to argue for their own suffrage.<sup>14</sup>

Much of this work has focused on the long nineteenth century, though more and more scholarship has begun to consider the impact of the empire on twentieth-century Britain. MacKenzie was one of the first to argue for the empire’s continuing significance in the post-Edwardian era. In his 1984 book, *Propaganda and Empire*, he argued that

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<sup>11</sup> Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830-1867* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002). See also her *White, Male, and Middle-Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The ‘Manly Englishman’ and the ‘Effeminate Bengali’ in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1995).

<sup>13</sup> Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>14</sup> Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994). Burton is one of the most prolific of the new imperial historians. See also *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); *At the Heart of the Empire: Indians and the Colonial Encounter in Late-Victorian Britain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).



popular enthusiasm for the empire did not die in the trenches or in the economic depression of the Slump, but that in fact, “imperial themes secured *greater* cultural penetration...and indeed prolonged their shelf life until the 1950s.”<sup>15</sup> In his introduction to his 1986 collection, *Imperialism and Popular Culture*—a defining piece of scholarship in the work on the culture of empire in the twentieth century—MacKenzie argued,

...there is ample evidence to suggest that the role of Britain as a world power deriving from its unique imperial status continued to be projected to the British public after the First World War. Victory in war had confirmed rather than diminished that status, however much the economic indicators pointed the other way. On the contrary, in the economic storms of the inter-war years it was possible again, as in the late nineteenth century, to depict the Empire as a savior from decline.<sup>16</sup>

Mining a rich variety of cultural sources—children’s books, popular music, cartoons, novels, radio broadcasts—scholars have pointed to the frequent allusions to empire in popular culture well into the second half of the twentieth century to argue that the empire remained pertinent to Britons and that even in the throes of decolonization, the empire continued to define British self-perceptions.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, in the first half of the twentieth century, the most popular form of popular culture was film, a fact that is reflected in the increasing number of studies that explore imperial themes in the cinema. Jeffrey Richards, by far the most prolific scholar of British empire cinema, has published widely on the subject from a variety of perspectives—from the published version of his doctoral dissertation, *Visions of Yesterday*, in which he first laid out the thematic ties underlying the ‘cinema of empire’ to his article “‘Soldiers Three’: The ‘Lost’ Gaumont British Imperial Epic,” in which he

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<sup>15</sup> MacKenzie, *Propaganda*, 256.

<sup>16</sup> John MacKenzie, “Introduction,” in John Mackenzie, ed, *Imperialism and Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press,, 1986), 8.

<sup>17</sup> See for example the essays in Ward, ed, *British Culture and the End of Empire*.

explores the embattled production history of a single India film.<sup>18</sup> Basic to all of Richards's work is his argument that empire films were based in nineteenth century values and a kind of nostalgia for the nineteenth century.<sup>19</sup> Martin Stollery explores representations of the empire in the 'modernist' medium of the British documentary film movement and is one of the few scholars to seriously consider audience reception.<sup>20</sup> Numerous other scholars have devoted portions of their larger studies to thematic explorations of empire films produced between 1934 and 1947.<sup>21</sup>

Most recently, Priya Jaikumar added to the study of empire cinema with *Cinema at the End of Empire*. Jaikumar reads debates circulating around the Indian film market as a reflection of a triangulated battle for cultural and political hegemony between a declining Britain, a rising United States, and an increasingly nationalist India. British film laws, then, became a way of negotiating this shifting balance of power in order to maintain a position of world influence for Britain. The fear of Hollywood infiltrating the

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<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey Richards, *Visions of Yesterday* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973) and Jeffrey Richards, "'Soldiers Three': The 'Lost' British Gaumont Imperial Epic," *Historical Journal of Film and Television* 15 (March 1995).

<sup>19</sup> See also his chapter "Censorship in Operation: Imperial Policy" in *Dream Palace*; Richards, "Boys Own Empire: Feature Films and Imperialism in the 1930s" in Mackenzie, *Imperialism*; Richards, *Films and British National Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997); Richards, "Korda's Empire: Politics and Film in *Sanders of the River*, *The Drum* and *The Four Feathers*," *Australian Journal of Screen Theory* 5-6 (January-July 1979, 122-137; Richards, "Patriotism with Profit: British Imperial Cinema in the 1930s," in James Curran and Vincent Porter, *British Cinema History* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble Books, 1983); Richards, "Imperial Heroes for a Post Imperial Age: Films and the End of Empire" in Ward, *British Culture*.

<sup>20</sup> Martin Stollery, *Alternative Empires: European Modernist Cinemas and Cultures of Imperialism* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000). For other work on non-fiction films see Stephen Constantine, "Bringing the Empire Alive': The Empire Marketing Board and Imperial Propaganda, 1926-33" in Mackenzie, *Imperialism*; Wendy Webster, *Englishness and Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Paul Swann, "John Grierson and the G.P.O. Film Unit, 1933-1939," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 3, 1 (1983), 19-34; Stephen P. Jones, *The British Labour Movement and Film, 1918-1939* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987).

<sup>21</sup> See for example, Sarah Street, *British National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1997); Sue Harper, *Picturing the Past: The Rise and Fall of the British Costume Film* (London: BFI Publishing, 1994); H. Mark Glancy, *When Hollywood Loved Britain: The Hollywood "British" Film, 1939-1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994); Brian Taves, *The Romance of Adventure: The Genre of Historical Adventure Movies* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1993); Marcia Landy, *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001).

Indian market and the strengthening of an indigenous Indian film industry was symptomatic of Britain's fears of insignificance in the new world order. She goes on to demonstrate how British anxieties about its diminishing status were reflected in narrative motifs of British empire films. She identifies three distinct cycles in British empire films produced between 1927 and 1947: "realist" (*Sanders of the River*), "romantic" (*The Four Feathers*), and "modernist" (*Black Narcissus*).<sup>22</sup>

If empire played such a critical role in twentieth-century Britain, why, then, did Indian independence elicit so little response from the British public? A number of scholars have argued that in the post-war era, the empire lost much of its popular support.<sup>23</sup> Recent work from prominent scholars such as David Cannadine and Bernard Porter directly contrasts with the new imperial history, contending that if the empire was a source of British pride in the long nineteenth century—and even this is a matter of debate—popular jingoism died in the trenches of the First World War, an argument that

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<sup>22</sup> Priya Jaikumar, *Cinema at the End of Empire: A Politics of Transition in Britain and India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

<sup>23</sup> See for example Corelli Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power* (New York: Morrow, 1972); Robert Holland, *European Decolonization, 1918-1981: An Introductory Survey* (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1985); Brian Lapping, *End of Empire* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985); P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Crisis and Deconstruction, 1914-1990* (New York: Longman, 1993).

Of course, this work represents only a small cache of the work on decolonization and represents only one view, that decolonization originated in Britain. A number of prominent scholars have also argued that decolonization originated in the colonies as nationalist movements grew stronger and colonial governments lost their 'traditional' local allies. See for example, Arun Chandra Bhuyan, *The Quit India Movement: The Second World War and Indian Nationalism* (New Delhi: Manas, 1975); A. Martin Wainwright, *Inheritance of Empire: Britain, India, and the Balance of Power in Asia, 1938-55* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994); A. Moin Zaidi, *The Way out to Freedom: An Inquiry into the Quit India Movement Conducted by Participants* (New Delhi: Orientalia, 1973); Francis G. Hutchins, *India's Revolution: Gandhi and the Quit India Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973); R.J. Moore, *Churchill, Cripps, and India, 1939-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India, 1885-1947* (New York: Macmillan, 1989); D.A. Low, *Eclipse of Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); John Gallagher, *The Decline, Revival, and Fall of the British Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

This thesis does not attempt to theorize the impetus behind decolonization but instead to study British reactions to that process.

Stuart Ward calls ‘the minimum impact thesis.’<sup>24</sup> While MacKenzie argued that the empire remained a relevant theme in British culture and force in British society throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Porter and Cannadine argue that for the majority of British, the empire played a minimal role in their lives. Porter, for example, argues that during the process of decolonization, “The mass of people, as they had all along, cared very little.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly, David Cannadine argued, “The British Empire may have been won in a ‘fit of absence of mind’, but as far as the majority of the population seems to have been concerned, it was given away in a fit of collective indifference.”<sup>26</sup>

This thesis argues that while the empire was still a critical flashpoint in twentieth-century British culture, it was important for reasons distinctly different from those of the nineteenth century. If, as Richards rightly points out, films about India reused familiar nineteenth-century themes, discussions of India films suggest that audiences interpreted those themes in new ways, ways that reflect a changing relationship between Britain and India and in some ways already anticipated a post-imperial world order.

While this thesis grows out of key aspects of the new imperial history—the critical focus on the social and cultural constriction of national and imperial identities and the critical role played by empire in shaping British history—it also diverges from this scholarship. First, it takes a transnational approach to British imperial culture, arguing that in the twentieth century, extra-imperial processes came to shape and even dominate British imperial culture. Second, it draws on the work of reception theorists to explore

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<sup>24</sup>Stuart Ward, “Introduction” in Ward, ed., 3.

<sup>25</sup> Bernard Porter, *The Lion’s Share: A Short History of British Imperialism, 1850-1995* (New York: Longman, 1996), 247. See also his *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>26</sup> David Cannadine, *In Churchill’s Shadow: Confronting the Past in Modern Britain* (London: Allen Lane, 2002), 26.

how audiences interpreted the themes of imperial culture, rather than analyzing these themes themselves.

### **Transnational Imperial Culture**

Already by the turn of the twenty-first century scholars had begun to express concern that imperial history might become just as parochial as its nationally-focused predecessor. The North American Conference on British Studies produced a “Report on the State and Future of British Studies in North America” in 1999 that warned

To remain viable, we need to demonstrate that this history of Britain is not merely an ‘island story,’ but indeed a world story. This group is not advocating imperial history per se; it, too, is susceptible to insularity in some of its preoccupations. It is referring instead to an appreciation of British history as an avenue of inquiry into the larger processes that have transformed the globe and the relations among its inhabitants.<sup>27</sup>

Importantly, a focus on imperial history was not a simple fix to the problem of insularity. In fact, as they saw it, “There is in fact plenty of so-called domestic British history that is appreciative of the need to connect to the wider world; and by the same token, there is some imperial history that, strangely, is not,” focusing on imperial connections to such an extent that it elides any connections between the empire and larger world systems.<sup>28</sup>

Some scholars have attempted to overcome this insularity, approaching their work from a more transnational perspective, exploring the movement of people, goods, and ideas in ways that were not bound by national or even imperial borders.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Peter Stansky, Nicoletta F. Gullace, Cynthia Herrup, Dane Kennedy, Brian Levack, Jeffrey Reznick, and Martin Wiener, “NACBS Report on the State and Future of British Studies in North America,” 18 November 1999 (<http://www.nacbs.org/NACBS/report.html>, accessed 26 February 2011).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> See for example Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (New York: Beacon Press, 2001); Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in the Modern World* (New York: Viking, 1985); Arjun Appadurai, ed, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People without a History* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1982) ; Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot*

This thesis sees transnational processes as critical in shaping national and imperial culture. My concentration on films, which circulated to and through Britain from around the world, offers insight into processes not readily apparent from a national or imperial perspective. Looking at these extra-imperial relationships demonstrates the extent to which British imperial culture in the twentieth century was not completely of Britain's own making and that imperial themes were not always at the center of how British audiences interpreted these films.

### **Reception and British Imperial Culture**

Over the past fifteen years, a number of scholars have noted that much of the work on empire cinema has focused on textual analysis of films with limited attention to audience reception, missing the potentially complex ways in which audiences interpreted films. For example, in the introduction to their anthology on Orientalism on film, Gaylyn Studlar and Matthew Bernstein caution that

...these essays should not suggest that the interpretations of Orientalist films they offer are the only ones that circulated when the films premiered or that prevail when they are watched today. These films were valued or dismissed for other qualities—their authorship and their generic affiliations, for example. In this light, one of the most interesting topics for further research would be the *reception* of Orientalist films among different audiences and even among creative talents.<sup>30</sup>

In his work on cinema and the British culture of empire Martin Stollery echoed Studlar and Bernstein, writing,

It is likely that future studies of popular film and orientalism, Eurocentrism and colonial discourse will develop along the lines indicated by Studlar and Bernstein. They will follow general trends in film and cultural studies by becoming

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*Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008) and Delcey Deacon, Penny Russell, and Angela Woollacott, eds., *Transnational Lives: Biographies of Global Modernity, 1700-Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

<sup>30</sup> Matthew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlar, eds., *Visions of the East: Orientalism on Film* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 11.

methodologically more ‘audience friendly’ while also, hopefully, retaining the foundational political insights of [Ella] Shohat and [Robert] Stam.<sup>31</sup>

As late as 2007 when I was in the midst of writing this dissertation scholars were still calling for greater attention to be paid to audience responses to imperial culture rather than continued assumptions about their interpretation. In a historiographical essay on “Modern Britain and the New Imperial History,” historian James Thompson argued

Much cultural history has been stronger in dealing with the production than the consumption of symbolic goods. The popularity of films with an imperial backdrop may not have been due to the presence of empire, and audience responses to such imagery need to be established rather than assumed.<sup>32</sup>

In fact, as I will show, there was not always a one-to-one correlation between India films’ popularity with British audiences and their imperial themes.

A few scholars have already begun to explore popular reception of empire cinema. Stollery, for example, dedicated the last chapter of his 2000 book to “an outline of some provisional frameworks which would require more empirical research to substantiate,” focusing primarily on writings from professional film reviewers and filmmakers.<sup>33</sup> Prem Chowdhry analyzes the reception of four India films—*The Relief of Lucknow* (1938), *Gunga Din* (1939), *The Drum* (1938), and *The Rains Came* (1938)—in India, drawing primarily on newspaper articles and India Office Records to explore Indian protests of these films, arguing that “these films also accommodate sentiments important to the audience in colonial India, which did not necessarily subscribe to the dominant ideology.”<sup>34</sup> My work is a continuation of these earlier projects, incorporating a larger cache of films, identifying a broader range of primary sources that indicate

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<sup>31</sup> Stollery, 10.

<sup>32</sup> James Thompson, “Modern Britain and the New Imperial History,” *History Compass* 5, 2 (March 2007), 455-462.

<sup>33</sup> Stollery, 172-3.

<sup>34</sup> Prem Chowdhry, *Colonial India and the Making of Empire Cinema: Image, Ideology, and Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

audience reception, and moving away from the model of reception as being based in either accepting or rejecting some kind of hegemonic ideology about the empire.

This thesis follows most closely on the model of audience reception laid out by film theorist Janet Staiger. Staiger identifies her model as a kind of third way between text-activated models of reception—which, like those of the Frankfurt School, envision a stable meaning for films created by their producers—and reader-activated models—which, like those of Stuart Hall and scholars of the Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), imagine audiences as being able to create an infinite numbers of meanings for a film. Staiger identifies her own model as one that is “context activated.”<sup>35</sup> A context-activated approach envisions audiences as creating meaning for films, but recognizes that these interpretations are still limited by the historical context, the available historical frameworks, in which the film is consumed. She argues, for example, that we cannot understand how American audiences in the 1990s understood *JFK* without understanding the already existing debates and frictions between official and popular history—director Oliver Stone provided an “unofficial history” that actually reflected the popular belief that President Kennedy’s assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, had not acted alone. These ongoing debates framed audiences’ interpretations of the film.

Staiger also rejects Hall’s tripartite distinctions of modes of reception. Hall argued that audience reception could be divided into three categories.<sup>36</sup> First, dominant interpretations accept the text exactly as its producer intended and reify the dominant ideology expressed by the text. Second, negotiated interpretations participate in critical

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<sup>35</sup> Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>36</sup> Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding” in Stuart Hall, ed., *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies* (London: Hutchinson, 1980).



reflection on the text in which they accept some aspects of the dominant ideology and reject others. Finally, oppositional interpretations reject the dominant ideology of the text and create a new subversive meaning for it.

Staiger sees Hall's model as having set scholars on a path of rooting out subversive readings (sometimes where they do not actually exist), interpreting the division of dominant-negotiated-oppositional as bad-good-best in order to show culture as a site of rebellion.<sup>37</sup> She argues that Hall's followers are misguided in believing that all texts represent a dominant discourse and that, therefore, all forms of oppositional readings were automatically progressive. All readings are, according to Staiger, negotiated. Dominant and oppositional interpretations are merely hypothetical categories. By identifying readings with certain socioeconomic categories, CCCS scholars create "a certain predestination in...interpretations of data when categories of individuals are already constituted by the researchers."<sup>38</sup>

While work on reception is widely accepted as a worthwhile undertaking, actually finding sources that allow scholars to discuss historical audiences without making assumptions about their reactions is difficult. There are good reasons why so much work on reception studies has come not from historians but from sociologists and film scholars working on the late twentieth century. When JoEllen Shively studied Indian and Anglo responses to *The Searchers* in the early 1990s, she handed them questionnaires and conducted focus groups.<sup>39</sup> David Morley also used focus groups in his now-iconic study

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<sup>37</sup> Staiger, *Interpreting*, 75.

<sup>38</sup> Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

<sup>39</sup> JoEllen Shively, "Cowboys and Indians: Perceptions of Western Films Among American Indians and Anglos," in Robert Stam and Toby Miller, eds, *Film and Theory: An Anthology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 345-360.

of British audiences of the BBC news program *Nationwide*.<sup>40</sup> Historian Jackie Stacey offers an extensive justification on how her research on British women's reception of Hollywood starlets transformed from studying historical spectators to one that studies women's memories of these films.<sup>41</sup>

Guided by Staiger's "context activated" approach, this thesis argues that we cannot understand the culture of empire or the genre of imperial films without understanding how they were interpreted in the historical moment in which they were released. Assuming that films hold indelible meaning throughout the ages is not only ahistorical, it strips films of any power to tell us about the past. Historians attempting to explore cultural reception encounter an immediate problem—how do you analyze reception when your interviewees need to respond to questions they were never asked or, most often, who left no traces of their responses? This thesis uses a number of different sources to try to understand how audiences might have responded to India films—letters to film magazines, contemporary studies of cinemagoing, film reviews, official records, script revisions, and even films themselves. Rather than attempting to argue for one overarching British response, this thesis attempts to unpack responses from different subsets of the British audience to different kinds of films in distinct historical contexts.

This thesis also intersects with recent scholarship on genre theory, particular Rick Altman's revisionist work on the category of genre in film studies. Altman argues that generic studies have centered on a number of claims—that the film industry creates and audiences accept generic categories, that films clearly belong to distinct genres and that these genres are transhistorical constructions, that all genre films revolve around clear

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<sup>40</sup> David Morley, *The Nationwide Audience: Structuring and Decoding* (London: BFI, 1980).

<sup>41</sup> Jackie Stacey, *Star-Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

archetypes.<sup>42</sup> Altman, however, argues that genres are collaboratively constructed by film producers, the film industry, film critics, and film audiences and that genres are far more hybrid and unstable than previous work has acknowledged.

This thesis argues that while scholars have primarily explored India films as part of a larger genre of empire films, British audiences often discussed India films in ways that sometimes ignored their imperial plotlines. Discussions about India films demonstrate that British audiences—including government officials, exhibitors, critics, and filmgoers—often understood India films to be part of and in dialogue with a number of different genres (including travelogues, adventure films, romantic melodramas, historical epics, costume films).

### **Chapter Breakdown**

Each of the six chapters in this thesis addresses a particular scholarly argument, many of which have been taken as accepted wisdom in the historiography of empire cinema. Most previous scholarship about popular cinema has assumed a somewhat stable image of India from the nineteenth century, one that capitalized on British jingoism. The first three chapters of this thesis argue that if post-1934 filmmakers often drew on nineteenth-century apologists of empire, like Rudyard Kipling, for inspiration, interpretations by film audiences demonstrate that they understood these films in uniquely twentieth-century terms.

Much scholarship has focused on a small cache of films produced between 1934 and 1942, to the exclusion of dozens of films about India screened in Britain in the last thirty years before Indian independence. My first two chapters argue that the influx in the 1930s of films based on stories written by the apologists of empire had little to do

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<sup>42</sup> Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), Chapter 2.

with British audiences' demands. In fact, in looking at films produced in the 1920s, the most successful India films in this period told stories about Indian life before the Raj or about tender relationships formed between British and Indian characters. The advent of sound and the financial breakdown of the British film industry in the early 1930s made Hollywood's visions of India prominent. This shift to Hollywood's dominance brought about the influx of gung-ho imperial adventure stories. These films, supposedly the hallmarks of twentieth-century imperial culture, reflected American interests and preoccupations far more than British ones.

My first chapter, "Beyond Kipling: *The Light of Asia* and Silent India Films," shows that films released between 1917 and 1935 rarely looked to writers like Kipling for their stories and in fact marketed themselves as bringing real stories of India to British screens. Looking at the film *The Light of Asia* (1925), a British-Indian-German collaboration that ran for more than nine months at London's Philharmonic Hall in 1926, as a case study, I explore the factors that made this unusual film a relative success and to understand why its success was never repeated by another Indian film. Using press releases, advertisements, and film reviews, I argue that *The Light of Asia* capitalized on British audiences' desire for a glimpse at 'real' India and their belief that films produced and performed by Indians gave an 'authentic' view of Indian life. These sources suggest that British audiences actively sought films that depicted India beyond gung-ho adventuring in the Khyber Pass. But Rai's film found relative success in the British market in 1927 because audiences interpreted the film outside of Rai's original intentions—to create a *satyagraha* film that would highlight India's achievements outside

of the Raj—and saw the film as a travelogue designed to give them a voyeuristic view of contemporary Indian life.

By the mid-1930s, with few exceptions, Hollywood's India films dominated British screens. My second chapter, "On National Feelings and Becoming a Better Man," argues that as venues for the distribution of other national cinemas closed to British exhibitors, images of India became dictated both by what Americans wanted to see of the Raj and by what studios believed the British wanted to see of India. In fact I argue that the later period's focus on adventure films tells us little about British audiences' tastes or opinions of India or the empire. I track the evolving script of the project that would eventually become RKO's *Gunga Din* from its first treatment in 1929 until the film's final release in 1939 to show how American tastes, policy, and public opinion came to dominate the genre of India films. What previous scholarship has failed to highlight is that while the image of India on British screens may have been a nationalist project, it was overwhelmingly America's project and not Britain's. Using records from film censors in both America and in Britain, I demonstrate that British officials could exert little control over the depictions of India on their movie screens.

Using writings from British audiences, my third chapter, "The Adventure of Empire," destabilizes the idea that these later films found popularity among British audiences based primarily on nineteenth-century nostalgia and popular jingoism. It argues that in many ways India films actually caused more anxiety than patriotism in British audiences. Audience responses suggest that Hollywood's India films often spoke more to their concerns about Anglo-American relations than their imperial bonds with India. Frustrated writers often complained that Hollywood's India films simply stole

British history only to sell it back to British audiences at significant profits, highlighting the fact that their own studios could not capitalize on homegrown British stories or produce any reliably appealing products. Moreover they saw India films as backhanded compliments to the British people, poking fun at the British by caricature representations that audiences recognized as thinly veiled jabs at their expense by Americans. Far from boosting patriotism, India films created something of a public embarrassment for British audiences.

In spite of these objections, India films were undeniably popular in the British market. Rather than attempting to find one overarching explanation for this appeal, as other scholars have done, I suggest one of many possible attractions for one of many audience subsets. India films found particular popularity with women audiences, a fact that challenges assumptions that the adventure of empire was a masculine and masculinist project. Women writers argued that India films offered them a unique opportunity for vicarious adventuring and were attractive for reasons that had only a tangential connection to their imperial settings.

My fourth chapter, “Pig Skins, Rope Tricks, and Elephant Boys: British Indians and India Films,” argues that rather than simply capitalizing on nineteenth-century nostalgia, this later cycle of India films became a site for discussions about the growing Indian community in Britain and for negotiating visions of the relationship between future imperial immigrants and their white neighbors. I explore the role of India films in helping to shape white British expectations for imperial immigrant communities in the twentieth century and the role that Indians living in Britain played in shaping these expectations. Indian writers used India films as a site for discussing paradigms for

imperial immigrant communities in Britain. They argued, with little dispute from their white interlocutors, that that Indians in Britain needed to be recognized as members of the British community, not simply Indian or colonial expatriates.

But the paradigm with the largest white British audience came from Sabu, a young Indian boy, who became an international film star in British and Hollywood productions of the 1930s and 1940s. If the White Man's Burden and the civilizing mission were two of the dominant themes of British imperialism in the nineteenth century, Sabu's star text suggests significant changes in the goals of this mission. I examine how his image implies a shift from the civilizing mission as something that happened in the outposts of the empire to a process that created new Britons capable of contributing to the metropole. Stories of Sabu's exceptional life demonstrate that, at least in the 1930s, Britons envisioned imperial immigrants as being an asset, not a threat, to the British way of life, but only if they seamlessly assimilated into an artificially homogenous vision of white British culture. As I show, Sabu created an imaginative standard to which many white British audiences might hold post-war imperial immigrants.

Chapter five, "From 'Notorious Agitator' to 'India's Greatest Citizen': Gandhi in British Newsreels," argues that British newsreels about Gandhi developed through a balancing act between British official concerns, the American public's attraction to the Indian nationalist movement, and Gandhi's own interest in using film to draw attention to his cause. Scholars have assumed that much of the British public envisioned Gandhi and his followers as an evil force knocking at the gates of the British Empire. This chapter argues that British newsreels, a key source of information for many British audiences,

never consistently envisioned Gandhi as a threat or a menace. In fact, over the course of twenty years, newsreels redrafted and reshaped Gandhi's image repeatedly as a result of evolving collaboration and engagement between Gandhi, the American newsreel industry, and British officials. British newsreel editors actually served as a kind of audience for raw footage imported from American-financed mother companies, and newsreels reflected their own interpretations of this footage for British cinema audiences. British newsreels created an unstable image of Gandhi shaped by an ever-shifting balance of power between these three players.

In my final chapter, "Defining Home in British Colonial Home Movies," I explore a small cache of home movies produced by British living in India. These films demonstrate the uneven nature of these shifting discussions about India. While responses from British audiences demonstrate an evolving British conception of India that moved beyond India's status as a British colony, home movies, produced by filmmakers living on the precipice of Indian independence and who had the most at stake personally in the loss of India, fail to register the shifting dynamics between Britain and India in the last thirty years of British rule. This chapter argues that these home movies served as a response to the many extradiegetic contemporary texts about British life in India and the end of the British Raj. If metropolitan understandings of Anglo-Indian relations underwent significant adjustment in the last thirty years of British rule in India that already anticipated Indian independence, these home movies suggest that their filmmakers isolated themselves from such revisionist thinking.



In the end *Moving Images* argues that while the recent shifts in imperial historiography have been right to point to the continuing relevance of the empire in twentieth-century Britain and to the importance of exploring the continuing prevalence of imperial themes in British culture, audiences had already recognized a shifting relationship between Britain and India, one that no longer defined India simply as another red spot on the imperial map. If the British seemed apathetic in 1947, I argue, perhaps this was because they had already accepted a vision of a world in which Britain and India would cooperate outside of the confines of the empire; August 1947 simply reflected a fulfillment of this evolving vision. British audiences allowed India to slip away not in a fit of collective indifference but in a fit of collective reimagination.

## Chapter One

### Beyond Kipling: *The Light of Asia* and Silent India Films

On Saturday, March 27, 1926 London's Philharmonic Hall began its run of the film *Light of Asia*. A product of the Indian Players production company, *Light of Asia* was the first production from producer Himansu Rai, scriptwriter Niranjan Pal, and director Franz Osten, a partnership that would last for the next thirteen years. The film, which told the story of the life of Buddha, was Rai's brainchild. Deeply influenced by Gandhi's *swadeshi* campaign for economic self-sufficiency for India, Rai, a lawyer, hoped to encourage a developing Indian film industry that would function independently from the British and American studios.<sup>43</sup> *Light of Asia* ran for 36 weeks in London at the Philharmonic Hall, making it, I would argue, the most successful Indian film in inter-war Britain. In fact *Light of Asia* is one of the few India films of the silent era whose success can easily be measured by its long exhibition.

Rai's film was successful at a time when scholars have assumed that the most popular empire films drew on the works of the apologists of empire—G. A. Henty, A. E. W. Mason, Rider Haggard, and most notably, Rudyard Kipling—and that so few Indian films reached British screens because British audiences simply were not interested. This chapter argues that discussions around *Light of Asia* and other silent-era India films demonstrate British enthusiasm for films that were not overt tributes to the British empire. But what made Rai's film a success, I argue, was that British audiences could easily reinterpret its meaning to suit their own interests. While Rai intended to make a *swadeshi* film that demonstrated India's success outside of the Raj, British audiences

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<sup>43</sup> Carl-Erdmann Schonfeld, "Franz Osten's 'The Light of Asia' (1926): A German-Indian Film of Prince Buddha," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio & Television* 15 (October 1995), 556. For information on Rai's background, see also Erik Barnouw and Subrahmanyam Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 94-103 and Jaikumar, 93-98.

interpreted the film as a voyeuristic insider's view of 'real' India. In the end, the post-1934 rise of the jingoistic imperial adventure epic developed out of technical and financial, not cultural or social shifts. The rise of sound and the devastation of the British film industry over-determined the British market for Hollywood's vision of India.

Films released in the era of *Light of Asia* have, in many ways, fallen through the cracks in the scholarship on empire cinema. Many scholars have focused on the cache of films produced after 1934. In fact, some have even gone so far as to argue that the cycle of empire films began in 1935 with the almost coterminous release of *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (1935), *Clive of India* (1935), and *Sanders of the River* (1935). Richards, for example, argued that "the cycle [of imperial epics] was inaugurated by *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*," in 1935 "when the Empire is still flourishing."<sup>44</sup> He ignores any potential for the cycle to have an earlier history. Likewise, Chowdhry claims that "[films about India] reached their popularity during the decade 1929-1939."<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately traditional markers of audience popularity such as ticket sales were unavailable in Britain in the silent era, and in fact American and European studios produced more films about India between 1919 and 1929 than between 1929 and 1939. The only group with whom this cache of films has undoubtedly proven most popular is scholars.

It is this focus on the later cycle of empire films that led scholars to assume that movies based on stories by the champions of empire were the only ones that could be successful in the British market. Shohat and Stam, for example, assume that early "cinema adopted the popular fictions of colonialist writers like Kipling," ignoring films

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Chowdhry, 1.

that do not, in their words, “laud the colonialist enterprise.”<sup>46</sup> Richards claims that “the inspiration [for the cinema of empire], either direct (as in *Wee Willie Winkie* and *Gunga Din*) or indirect is Kipling, whose ideas inform the whole body of Imperial films.”<sup>47</sup>

According to Chowdhry,

[Kipling’s] stories were widely received as authentic, coming out of his experiences in India. . . . Kipling’s Indian connection, his vast readership, the influence that his work had come to exert in the formation of British and Indian imperial myths was undeniable.<sup>48</sup>

Jaikumar claims that while writers like Kipling and A.E.W. Mason had their stories adapted for the screen again and again, “the more ambivalent, modernist, critically acclaimed counternarratives of empire”—like those of Joseph Conrad, E. M. Forster, and George Orwell—were ignored by the film community.

These arguments, however, are heavily skewed by the authors’ own periodization. Between 1919 and 1934 only one India film was based on a Kipling story—1918’s *The Naulahka*—and many of the films produced in the silent era had nothing to do with lauding the achievements of the British empire.<sup>49</sup> In fact a good number did not address the empire at all. As I will show in my next chapter, Hollywood’s interests, not necessarily British demands, created the numerous Kipling (and Kiplingesque) adaptations of the later cycle of India films.

Even contemporary Indian filmmakers were dubious that efforts to market their films in Britain would be worth the trouble. They believed, according to Jaikumar, that

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Richards, *Visions*, 3.

<sup>48</sup> Chowdhry, 135.

<sup>49</sup> It is likely that this was in part due to Kipling’s control over his own copyrights until his death in 1936. In fact in 1919, he told the *Daily Express* that he would only allow his stories to be filmed if the Indian portions were actually filmed in India; this seems to have been a short-lived demand since *The Naulahka* was filmed entirely in the United States. After Kipling’s death, his wife took charge of these accounts, and Carrie seemed to be much less particular about who should adapt his stories for film.

their “restricted access to finances, technology, and training” put them at an immediate disadvantage in the British market, and in reaching out to western film companies for financial and technical support, they risked having to alter their projects and alienate their Indian audiences.<sup>50</sup> But the success of *Light of Asia* demonstrates both the potential for marketing Indian films in Britain—and in fact an interest in Indian films that seems to have derived from a rhetoric that promised that these films gave British audiences a window into ‘real’ India.

**“All-Indian”: *Swadeshi* in the Cinema**

Rai’s agenda for *Light of Asia* was a grand one. For him, the film was a nationalist project. Influenced by *swadeshi*, he intended to demonstrate the kinds of products India could create without depending on the colonial system for assistance.<sup>51</sup> Rai believed that in order to be truly successful Indian films needed to take advantage of technological advancements and the capital of the American and European industries. He went in search of European filmmakers “to train Indian technicians, artists, and producers,” but avoided British directors because he saw employing them as reinforcing Britain’s imperial influence.<sup>52</sup> In 1924 Rai convinced German production company EMELKA to help produce his first film. They would “provide equipment, camera crew and the director, Franz Osten.”<sup>53</sup> Rai had been intrigued by the moving drama of German *Oberammergau* passion plays and believed that a film about the life of Buddha could be an Indian corollary, giving Indians a sense of their history and playing equally well to

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<sup>50</sup> Jaikumar, 79.

<sup>51</sup> Schonfield, 556.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

urban and rural audiences.<sup>54</sup> The film was not the runaway success in India that Rai had hoped. The film did, however, find success in Europe, most notably in Britain and Germany.<sup>55</sup>

In marketing the film, Rai stressed the contributions of the film's Indian cast and royal patrons and its uniquely Indian story. Rai emphasized the film as a testament to Indian accomplishments outside of the Raj. In marketing the film to British audiences, Rai focused on the Indian-ness of the film, concentrating on its Indian story, its Indian production, and its Indian backdrop as evidence that the film provided glimpses into what India could produce.

The film told the story of Prince Gautama (Rai), the man who would become Buddha. The film begins with a group of British tourists stumbling upon an Indian sage praying at the temple at Gaya. When he speaks to them of the prince, one of the tourists asks him, "Who is Gautama?" The holy man promises, "I will tell you," and the tourists and the audiences are swept away to the kingdom of Magadha, "six centuries before the dawn of the Christian era," where the childless King Suddochana (Sarada Ukil) and Queen Maya (Rani Bala) desperately hope for an heir to their kingdom. Steadfastly standing by his wife and refusing to take another queen, the King chooses to call on "the sacred elephant" to wander the streets and choose a child from the kingdom to be his heir. All the mothers of the kingdom turn out with their sons, hoping their child might be chosen. But the elephant returns to the palace without a child. Just then the Queen

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 557.

<sup>55</sup> The most in-depth analysis of *Light of Asia* is filmmaker Carl-Erdmann Schonfeld's 1995 article, "Franz Osten's 'The Light of Asia' (1926): A German-Indian Film of Prince Buddha." Schonfeld's primary objective was to call attention to Osten, a director who he argues "deeply influenced the Indian cinema," but he made some cursory suppositions on the film's success in Germany. On one hand he argues that Osten's films offered a form of escape, arguing, "His huge sets were ideal for escaping from reality..." On the other hand, Osten's films "intended to show a 'real' India." His discussion of European reception focuses on Germany while I am interested in the film's reception in Britain.

begins to feel ill and we learn that, unbeknownst to her, she has been pregnant all along and gives birth to a son. The same wise man who the tourists meet in the temple appears before the king and tells him that his son will “deliver men from ignorance or rule the world—if he will deign to rule.”

The child grows to a handsome, sensitive young man, but the king is plagued by a terrible dream of burning canopies and empty thrones. The royal dream reader interprets the dream for the king: “Your son shall tread the sad and lowly path of self denial and renounce the throne.” Horrified, the king turns to his sages for advice, and they warn him, ‘Hide all evil from his sight. Keep him ignorant of old age, disease, and death.’” The king conspires to keep all sadness from his son in the hopes of avoiding this fate, distracting him with a beautiful bride, Gopa (Seeta Devi), and isolating the couple from the outside world. But Gautama becomes restless and sneaks away from the palace where he catches sight of a dying pauper. Disturbed by the tragedy of the real world, Gautama relinquishes his life as a prince and leaves the idyllic palace and his princess behind. Though he is tempted by the vices of the world, he chooses to serve men as a religious teacher, not a political ruler.

In press releases and promotional materials, Rai assured British audiences that this was a true story from Indian history, one that he and his compatriots believed was a “most reverent presentation of Gautama’s life,” a story that needed to be delivered “with simplicity, disregard of convention, artlessness, and the ring of truth” because it told “a human story and any faking would have spoiled it entirely.”<sup>56</sup> He stressed that his Indian partners in the production, and the cast and crew were “all-Indian,” had dedicated their time and efforts not for any financial remuneration but because they believed that it told a

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<sup>56</sup> Himansu Rai, “An Epic of India,” *The Picturegoer* (December 1926), 28.

story of Indian history worth sharing with the world. The wise men of the film—who were “real wise men of India, country of many unsolved mysteries”—could not, according to Rai have been persuaded to appear in the film by “all the sacks of rupees in the land.”<sup>57</sup> They agreed to participate because “they believed that [the film] was for India, and to send the famous history of their country over the world.”<sup>58</sup>

In fact, according to Rai, none of the actors in the film were even professional performers. They were simply Indians dedicated to broadcasting a powerful story of Indian history to the world; all were well-educated, well-bred, and in no need of financial profit from the film. In spite of “unfriendliness” shown to their troupe because “the thought of high-caste people acting for the screen did not seem right to a certain section of Indians,” the group had been determined to maintain the integrity of the story.<sup>59</sup> They also had no aspirations to become professional actors. He promised that *Light of Asia* would be “their first and only appearance on the photo-play screen.”<sup>60</sup> In emphasizing that the performers were not professional actors, Rai assured British audiences that the film represented a kind of personal tribute to promoting India’s history and its current potential and did not represent a profit-making venture for any of the key players.

Rai explicitly juxtaposed his film with those of the American and British studios. Whereas, according to Rai, these “western” studios relied heavily on brown-makeup to create the illusion of Indian characters, he repeatedly told readers that his film employed “No makeup—no artificial lights—no studio sets and no made up properties.”<sup>61</sup> He even

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. While Rai was correct that this would be their first appearance on the screen, for Seeta Devi it would not be the last. She appeared in several more Rai/Osten productions after *Light of Asia*.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.



went so far as to employ ‘real’ Indian priests, beggars, and lepers to play these roles in the film. When they needed someone to play a dying man, his assistant director found him a man actually in the last days of his life willing to participate in what he saw as a worthy project.<sup>62</sup> The Dream Reader of the film was “a dream reader indeed”; his reputation was known throughout India—Rai claimed that “very old people who had known him when they were children have never known him as anything else than a very old man with a long, white beard.”<sup>63</sup> Lest British readers doubt the veracity of this story, Rai reminded them that this doubt was simply a function of their own cultural bias: “You may think it is impossible for a man to be so old that he goes beyond living memory—but perhaps it is the tendency in this country to doubt anything which is not easily explained.”<sup>64</sup>

Whereas the British and American studios would have to rely on costume designers and studio sets, Rai promised that the princes of India support his *swadeshi* project to such an extent that they gave him access to their vast riches in order to show India in the best possible light. The Maharajah of Jaipur, who, Rai told audiences, was as committed to the goals of the film as any other member of the team, threw the full weight of his resources behind the production. He loaned “famous family jewels, family heirlooms for many generations and so valuable that it is almost impossible to estimate their price.”<sup>65</sup> He gave them “Real State elephants, irreplaceable, of course,” and let Rai

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

have access to “the real Chariot of the Sun God for our tournament scene. That chariot is over nine hundred years old, many times it has made real history.”<sup>66</sup>

All of this, Rai boasted, allowed him to produce the most impressive film of India ever seen. He prided himself on the fact that

...we made our picture entirely by means of natural light, and without one single item of painted scenery, ‘faked’ action, or untrue detail in any single part of it. It is merely a camera record of actual happenings—and that means considerably more work than the sort of film where ‘eyewash’ is permitted.<sup>67</sup>

According to Rai, no other film could come close to what he and his team had accomplished with *Light of Asia*: “In trying to get every detail about our picture real and true to life, we took a lot of trouble and were singularly successful. ... In our search for reality, we went to the very limits in order that the unmistakable stamp of truth might mark down our work.”<sup>68</sup> He reassured audiences that what he and his partners had produced was unique and uniquely Indian.

Rai stressed the Indian achievements of the film but did not acknowledge the contributions of non-Indian players. He never mentioned that Pal’s script, even the film’s very title, came from a poem written by an Englishman, Edwin Arnold’s *The Light of Asia*.<sup>69</sup> He did not mention the German Osten’s critical role in the film’s production. Even advertisements rarely credited Osten, labeling the film simply as “The Wonder Film of India... A Riot of Oriental Splendour in the first screen masterpiece filmed

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. 28.

<sup>69</sup> Gandhi biographer Judith Brown claims that the poem had a great influence on Gandhi during his university days in England and that believed that its account of Buddha’s teachings “echoed his Jain inheritance and his own movement through vegetarianism towards non-violence and compassion for all life.” See Judith Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 25-6. I have not been able to find any direct connection between Gandhi’s interest in the story and Rai’s and Pal’s choice to make this their first *swadeshi* film, though the coincidences—especially considering their third film, *A Throw of Dice*, came from the *Mahabharata*, another work that Gandhi listed as a great influence on his own thinking—seem almost too great to me.

exclusively in India” and presented by “The Indian Players.”<sup>70</sup> Advertisements also boasted that the film had been “financed by The Great Easter Corporation, Ltd., of Dehli—the Directors and Shareholders of which are all Indians.” No mention was made of the significant financial contribution of EMELKA.

Likewise, Rai made no mention of the fact that Seeta Devi, one of the film’s stars, had been born Renee Smith in Calcutta in 1905, the daughter of an Indian mother and British father.<sup>71</sup> Journalist Pran Nevile of *The Tribune* claims that Rai had such difficulty finding an Indian woman—acting considered akin to prostitution in many families, as it had been in many societies at the start of the film era—to play the part of Gopa that he eventually placed advertisements in English-language newspapers, a decision that must have troubled him greatly.<sup>72</sup>

Rai, in fact, prided himself on his ability to recruit “respectable women” for his films, admitting that he did so only with great difficulty.<sup>73</sup> By the 1920s the Indian Cinematograph Committee had expressed concern that so many film actresses were, in fact, prostitutes (although even many prostitutes shied away from film acting based on the stigma attached) and that the Indian film industry needed to attract more “respectable women” if it were to have any success.<sup>74</sup> This of course was a double-edged sword. So

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<sup>70</sup> Advertisements ran regularly in several London papers. See for example, *The Daily Express*, 7 April 1926, pg. 8.

<sup>71</sup> Pran Nevile of *The Times of India* claims that “one day in Calcutta, an Anglo-Indian friend of his sister came to call on them, accompanied by his 15-year-old daughter Renee Smith. The moment Rai saw her, he knew hers was the face he had been looking for [sic] so long.” Other sources have identified Devi’s father simply as British, and Nevile may be using “Anglo-Indian” to describe a British resident of India. See, Pran Nevile, “Multifaceted Pioneer,” *The Tribune Online*, 18 September 2010 (<http://www.tribuneindia.com/2010/20100918/saturday/main1.htm>, accessed 9 February 2011).

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Jaikumar, 97.

<sup>74</sup> Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, 169.

long as acting was seen as akin to prostitution Indian filmmakers would be hard-pressed to find Indian women willing to risk their reputations.

Anglo-Indian women like Devi represented, to use the ICC's words, "a better class" of women who proved less daunted by the social stigma attached to film acting.<sup>75</sup> Media scholars Erik Barnouw and Subrahmanyam Krishnaswamy point out that selling Anglo-Indian women as Indian actresses was a common practice in the early Indian film industry, a way around the stigma.<sup>76</sup> Anglo-Indian women created screen names that accented their Indian heritage and erased their European backgrounds: Sulochana was born Ruby Meyers, Indira Devi was born Effie Hippolet, Lalita Devi was born Bonnie Bird, Madhuri was born Beryl Clausen, Marorama was born Winnie Stewart, and Sabita Devi was born Iris Gasper.<sup>77</sup> Jaikumar argues that the Anglo-Indian community was "more progressive," which allowed women like Renee Smith to transition into careers as actresses without fearing social ostracism from their community.<sup>78</sup> Barnouw and Krishnaswamy argue, on the other hand, that Anglo-Indian women, who were "never fully accepted by Indian or British circles, had found a welcome in film," that their social ostracism because of their racial backgrounds made social ostracism as a result of their career choices seem less harrowing.<sup>79</sup>

On one hand their positions along "interior frontiers" afforded them a unique opportunity.<sup>80</sup> Part of an internally alienated community these women likely had fewer

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<sup>75</sup> Quoted in Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, 169.

<sup>76</sup> Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, 169-170.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Jaikumar, 97.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 80. Stoler borrows this term from philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte, arguing that by appearing to challenge the internal frontiers of an imagined "national essence" so-called mixed blood children became

concerns about living up to the race- or class-based standards so the stigma against women actors likely worried them less than many of their counterparts. And yet in order to achieve that welcome, they needed to dispatch with any hints of a European identity and allow audiences to embrace them as, in Jaikumar's words, "icons of Hindu femininity."<sup>81</sup> The careers of mixed-race women who attempted to abandon their Indian identities in an attempt to market themselves as British, on the other hand, were much more difficult to build.<sup>82</sup> Rai avoided any discussion about Devi's heritage, billing her only as part of his "all-Indian" cast.

For Rai, then, the goal of the film was clear. In successfully depicting what he saw as a moment of greatness in Indian history, *Light of Asia* demonstrated India's long-standing achievement without the need for British intervention. But if his goals were clear to his cast and even in his own mind, British audiences missed much of his implications for the film. They, like Rai, focused on the "realness" of the film but not as a signifier of India's capacities. Instead they understood the film as a teaching tool about modern India.

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the site of intense concern and therefore intense legislation as officials tried to work out how to handle this imagined affront. For more, see Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, chapter 4.

<sup>81</sup> Jaikumar, 97.

<sup>82</sup> In fact, the only one of which I know is Merle Oberon. Oberon's parentage has been the subject of some debate, but it seems clear that her mother was Anglo-Indian and her father was English. When Oberon came to London Studios, Alexander Korda saw her mixed-race background as such a hot button topic he believed it to be essential to erase any traces of her Indian heritage and Indian past. He avoided any questions of her racial background by avoiding India altogether in her marketing, instead choosing to present his new star (and future second wife) to audiences as Tasmanian. For a discussion of Korda's work on Oberon's image, see Karol Kulik, *Alexander Korda: The Man Who Could Work Miracles* (London: W.H. Allen, 1975). For a more recent analysis of Oberon's biography from the stance of Australian audiences reception of her stardom see Angela Woollacott, "Colonial Origins and Audience Conclusion: The Merle Oberon Story in 1930s Australia" in Delsey Deacon, Penny Russell, and Angela Woollacott, *Transnational Lives: Biographies of Global Modernity, 1700-Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 96-108.

### “Dignified and Supremely Beautiful”: The Search for ‘Real’ India on Film

If Rai intended his film as a testament to Indian accomplishments, British audiences understood it as an authentic depiction of contemporary Indian life. Audiences interpreted Rai’s focus on his Indian actors, Indian scenery, and Indian story—which he intended as proof of India’s accomplishments and support of his *swadeshi* film—as a promise that the film offered a voyeuristic glance at ‘authentic’ Indian culture. This reading of the film placed it solidly within other popular India films of the same period, films that touted stories penned by Indian authors and stories about Indian life outside (or alongside) the Raj, likewise promoted as glimpses at ‘authentic’ depictions of Indian life.

British reviewers lauded *Light of Asia*, arguing that it gave an unprecedented glimpse of an India most viewers would never see, often echoing Rai’s own publicity. The film reviewer for *The Times* surmised that “the picture has been made in India without the aid of studio sets, artificial lights, or faked properties, and if it consequently loses something in steadiness of photography, it gains much more in naturalness of scenery.” The film critic for *The Daily Express* likewise praised the film for its ‘realism,’ assuring readers,

The marvelous thing about this picture is that it is absolutely free from ‘fake’ scenery or sets of any description. The palaces are the palaces of the Maharajah of Jaipur, who placed his estate, his retainers, his elephants, camels, and jewels at the producer’s disposal. The effort is gorgeous beyond the wildest dreams of Hollywood. It is more—it is dignified and supremely beautiful.<sup>83</sup>

He concludes that “[the story] moves against a background whose splendor because of its realism makes the onlooker doubt sometimes whether he is watching a screenplay.”<sup>84</sup>

*Picturegoer* writer Lionel Collier marveled at the “resources on a magnificent

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<sup>83</sup> “Indian Actors,” *The Daily Express* (March 26, 1926), 3

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

scale...placed in the producer's hands by H.H. the Maharajah of Jaipur, who not only lent his palaces, but also the whole of his States," including his "elephants and camels," and his jewels, the value of which "was so great that no insurance company would issue a policy."<sup>85</sup> *The Bioscope* felt the film represented "a remarkable display of the most picturesque aspects of India."<sup>86</sup> The reviewer felt that "By taking the pictures in the most picturesque districts of India and selecting a company of native players, the producer has been able to reproduce the Eastern atmosphere with absolutely fidelity."<sup>87</sup> None mentioned anything about Rai's *swadeshi* program.

Reviewers seemed especially attracted to what they saw as Rai's promises of authenticity and documentary glimpses at India. This sense of *sub rosa* observation of Indian life placed *Light of Asia* in dialogue with other popular India films of the same period. In fact, *pace* scholarship that sees India films as drawing solely on the likes of Kipling and Mason, many of the earlier India films looked to Indian authors for their inspiration, and reviewers lauded these efforts as giving audiences a glimpse of 'real' India. In emphasizing *Light of Asia*'s story as being a real one from Indian history, Rai unwittingly capitalized on British audiences' desire to see India films that drew on Indian stories rather than those of the apologists of empire. These films about, to quote one advertisement, "bygone days in vast, mysterious India, that land of many races and strange happenings" were at once advertised as 'authentically' Indian and as fantastic fairy tales.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>86</sup> "Light of Asia," *The Bioscope* (1 April 1926), 26.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> *Indian Love Lyrics* (1923), Pressbook Collection, British Film Institute.

For example, in 1928 British International pictures released *Emerald of the East*, a film that painted India as a land of princes and princesses, elephants and tigers, jewels and durbars. Yet advertisements for the film were very similar to those for *Light of Asia*, emphasizing the ‘authentic’ Indian-ness of the film. Press releases, for example, boasted that the screenplay was based on “a story by Mrs. Jerbanu Kothawala The well-known Parsee Authoress.”<sup>89</sup> Advertisements emphasized that while French director Jean de Kuharski employed European actors to play Indian roles, those actors were thoroughly immersed in Indian culture since “half the picture was made in India,” the other half having been filmed in France.<sup>90</sup> Even more importantly, like *Light of Asia*, *Emerald of the East*’s pressbook stressed that the film had prominent Indian supporters. The release claimed, “The State of Gwalior rendered much valuable assistance, the story being such a patriotic one aiming at unity between East and West.”<sup>91</sup> According to promotional materials, Gwalior threw the full weight of its resources and support behind its production because they believed the film would do so much good for “East-West” relations as “the last Maharajah of Scindia was a loyal friend of His Majesty the King,” so “the Maharanee and council gave every help” in producing the film.<sup>92</sup> Doing so, advertisements suggested, ensured that the film would be infused with the ‘real India’ film audiences desired. Director Jean de Kuharski’s unique access to the Maharanee’s resources meant that the “[e]ight thousand Indian troops,” “jewelry of untold wealth, gold and silver guns, chariots of gold,” “scores of elephants, decked in gold and silver trappings studded with emeralds and rubies, carrying golden haudahs on their backs,”

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<sup>89</sup> *Emerald of the East* (1928), Pressbook Collection, British Film Institute.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*



“carved silver palanquins,” and “state carriages” represented the real “grandeur and magnificence of the East.”<sup>93</sup>

Films like *Light of Asia* and *Emerald of the East* placed Indians outside of the control of the Raj by setting their stories in the pre-colonial era. But even films that included British characters told stories that envisioned Britons and Indians living together in a familial Anglo-Indian community that often downplayed a colonial racial hierarchy. Far from the plots of later India films that focused on nineteenth-century British soldiers and administrators and that prized stories from British ‘experts’ on India, silent films most often explored twentieth-century India as a place in which the British and Indians formed personal, intimate relationships.

Melodramas about star-crossed Anglo-Indian love affairs seem to have been especially popular in the British and American studios. These films often begin with a British man rescuing an Indian woman from some kind of threat, a theme Gayatri Spivak has so succinctly called “White men saving brown women from brown men” that appears in so much colonial (and postcolonial) discourse.<sup>94</sup> According to these films neither policy nor the colonial administration threatens these couples but rather the social expectations of those around them, both English and Indian. In *God’s Law and Man’s* (1917) the main character, Dr. Claude Drummond (Robert Walker), saves Ameia (Viola Dana) from being sacrificed to Krishna by offering money to make her his wife. Claude soon discovers that his father has already arranged a politically advantageous marriage to Olivia (Marie Adell), the daughter of the Major-General (Frank Currier). Realizing that she stands in the way of her husband’s social status, Ameia tries to poison herself but is

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds, *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

saved by her devoted husband. By a twist of fate he discovers that Ameia is also the daughter of the Major-General, the product of a marriage to an Indian wife that he abandoned during her pregnancy. Claude is allowed to remain married to his love while fulfilling his father's wish that he should marry the Major-General's daughter.

Most of these films, however, did not end so happily. In *Shattered Idols* (1922) David (James Morrisson), like Claude, rescues an Indian girl, Sarasvoti (Marguerite De La Motte), from temple priests. Falling instantly in love with her, he abandons his childhood sweetheart, marries Sarasvati, and brings her back to England, much to his mother's chagrin. David flourishes in England and is elected to Parliament, but Sarasvati is lost in a foreign culture and returns to India. David follows her back and finds himself caught up in a local uprising. Undeterred by the danger, he takes off in search of his wife. He finds her but is attacked by rebels, and Sarasvati lays down her life to save him as he had once saved her. In fact, between 1917 and 1931, ten American films told stories of Anglo-Indian romances.<sup>95</sup> After 1931, only one film—Twentieth Century-Fox's *The Rains Came* (1939)—even hinted at the subject.

Why the sudden disappearance of what had clearly been a common theme in early India films? The answer seems to lie with the increasing internal regulations in the British and American film industries after the First World War. In 1917 the Liberal MP TP O'Connor had set down his list of 43 themes he believed should be the basis for banning a film's release in Britain, including "Themes and references relating to 'race

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<sup>95</sup> These include *Each to His Kind* (Paramount, 1917), *God's Law and Man's* (Columbia Pictures Corp, 1917), *The Gates of Doom* (Universal, 1917), *Vengeance* (World Film Corp., 1918), *The Man from Downing Street* (Vitagraph Co. of America, 1922), *Shattered Idols* (J. L. Frothingham Productions, 1922), *The Rip-Tide* (A. B. Maescher, 1923), *The Tiger's Claw* (Famous-Players Lasky, 1923), *The Shadow of the East* (Fox Film Corp, 1924), and *Son of India* (MGM, 1931). Not included in this is are films that focused simply on unrequited love, which were not even more common but also continued throughout the post-Code sound era.

suicide.”<sup>96</sup> “O’Connor’s 43” became the basis for the British Board of Film Censors’ (BBFC) censorship standards, though interestingly, it is not until the 1930s that we see this rule being strictly enforced.<sup>97</sup> While the BBFC’s recommendation did not have the force of law, pictures that did not meet its standards rarely made it to British cinema screens.<sup>98</sup>

In 1922 the American film industry formed the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA), designed to provide internal regulations for the industry. Film scholar Ruth Vasey has shown that the MPPDA’s foundation began not only as a response to threats of censorship at home but also in response to threats of censorship abroad, which risked Hollywood’s profits.<sup>99</sup> These concerns only increased with the advent of sound in the late 1920s, which opened up a whole new arena for local censors’ concerns and additional technological and financial concerns in post-production revisions.<sup>100</sup> The MPPDA responded to the increasing concerns from overseas markets through its Foreign Department or directly through its president, Will Hays.<sup>101</sup>

In 1927 the association adopted a list of subjects that producers should avoid in their projects, a list that, according to Vasey, attempted to anticipate the concerns of foreign consumers and foreign censors.<sup>102</sup> Of all its foreign markets, the concerns of the British market (including its extended colonial markets) held the most influence over the MPDDA because it accounted for Hollywood’s biggest overseas profits. The MPPDA

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<sup>96</sup> Richards, *Dream Palace*, 113.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. This change likely had much to do with Colonel John Hanna, a figure to whom I will return in the next chapter, becoming the British Board of Film Censors’ chief script reader.

<sup>98</sup> Ruth Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood, 1918-1939* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 146.

<sup>99</sup> Vasey, Chapter 1.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., Chapter 3.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 78-79.

and the later Production Code Association (PCA) often deferred to the BBFC's regulations in their own suggestions to the American studios. That list of "Don'ts and Be Carefuls" likewise included a caution against scenes depicting "miscegenation." As I will show in my next chapter, however, if the MPPDA and PCA deferred to the BBFC, in practice American studios often tested the BBFC's boundaries.

Films like *God's Law and Man's* and *Shattered Idols* demonstrate that the guidelines devised by industry and political officials in Britain and the United States were not necessarily based in widespread popular social anxiety about miscegenation, as these films seem to have been both common and popular. These films also demonstrate that the guidelines instituted by the MPPDA and the BBFC were reactions against film plots that actually appeared with regular frequency. While films about Anglo-Indian romances might technically circumvent this rule, American filmmakers quickly dropped what had been a popular subject. In any case, after 1927 such plotlines more or less disappeared, but their frequent appearance in earlier films suggest a fascination with how the colonial encounter played out at a personal level.<sup>103</sup> In fact, the proliferation of romantic plotlines also suggest that in the silent era, film studios saw films about Anglo-Indian romances as profitable undertakings.

If stories about Anglo-Indian relationships do not seem to have raised the ire of British film audiences, films that used 'western' stories and actors to portray Indian characters often did. Reviewers expressed concern that no 'western' actor could

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<sup>103</sup> Film officials on both sides of the Atlantic halted productions in the 1930s that dealt with Anglo-Indian romantic relationships. The only film in the 1930s that even hinted at such a relationship was *The Rains Came* (1938), which was shrouded in innuendo. As I will show in the next chapter, the BBFC disliked the entire project but because the film steered clear enough from the book, in which the romance is at the center of the story, they could find no viable excuse to suggest revisions, though they would have liked to do so.

accurately portray the ‘reality’ of the Indian spirit. One *Picturegoer* reader, Eugenie, for example was dissatisfied with the acting of “desert gentlemen” used in films like Sinclair Hill’s *Indian Love Lyrics* (1923), which cast Englishman Owen Nares as Prince Zahindin, and *The Arab* (1924), which starred Ramon Navarro as Jamil Abdullah Azim. She scoffed, “No Arab to date ever warbled the ‘Indian Love Lyrics’ or pursued golden-haired females, as Navarro and the rest would have us believe.”<sup>104</sup>

In fact two of the most widely disseminated India films of the silent era—*Son of India* (1931) and *The Black Watch* (1929)—seem to have frustrated audiences greatly because they told stories British audiences saw as inauthentic. *Son of India*, like *The Arab*, was a Ramon Navarro vehicle. The film told the story of Karim (Navarro), the orphaned son of an India jewel merchant. When he tries to sell one of his father’s diamonds, an unscrupulous merchant accuses him of having stolen it. An affluent American, William Darsay (Conrad Nagel), steps forward to vouch for Karim, saving him from a life in jail. Karim tries to repay Darsay with the diamond, but when Darsay refuses, Karim swears his undying allegiance to the American. Karim sells the diamond, and the profit allows him to live a life in high society. At a social event he meets and falls in love with Janice (Madge Evans), an American girl. When Janice’s aunt discovers their plans to marry, she upbraids the girl for her relationship with an Indian man and sends for Janice’s brother to come home and talk to his sister. Karim is surprised to discover that William is Janice’s brother, just as William is surprised to discover that Karim is the Indian to whom his younger sister is engaged. He is saddened to do so, but William asks Karim to break off the engagement, reminding Karim about the kind of social ostracism his sister will experience if she goes through with the marriage. Karim

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<sup>104</sup> “What Do You Think,?” *The Picturegoer* (March 1927), 66.

pleads with William, but when the American insists, Karim feels he has no choice but to leave Janice, remembering the debt of gratitude that he owes to William.

*Son of India* raised the ire of those who believed the film poorly represented the ‘realities’ of Indian life. The *Picturegoer* film reviewer believed Navarro, a Cuban, had been “entirely wrongly cast as an Indian,” plain and simple.<sup>105</sup> The film critic for the *Daily Express* guessed, probably rightly, “I should imagine that the excuse to produce this farrago of hair-raising bunkum lay in a whim to use Ramon Navarro, while his contract lasts, together with some Oriental costumes that were attracting moths in the studio cupboard.”<sup>106</sup> He found the film completely unsatisfactory thanks to “a lot of faked Indian scenery, many impossibilities, the inaccurate uniforms of the Bombay police force, [and] some paste diamonds and pearls the size of eggs and beans respectively.”<sup>107</sup> The only good thing he could find about the film was that it did not, “conspire to achieve a ‘happy ending’ against all probability.”<sup>108</sup>

Importantly, none complained about the plot, which involved an American woman and an Indian man whose relationship is only severed by the demands of her family. In fact, many reviewers saw the film as a tragic story of star-crossed lovers, not an offensive display of miscegenation. The reviewer for *The Bioscope* described the story as one “of young love restrained by the barriers of race.”<sup>109</sup> He saw the story as sad, though not necessarily as tragic as he imagined the filmmaker intended, describing

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<sup>105</sup> “Son of India,” *The Picturegoer* (5 March 1932), 19.

<sup>106</sup> “Son of India,” *The Daily Express* (14 September 1931), 8.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> “Son of India,” *The Bioscope* (19 August 1931), 26.

the story and explaining,

The love story of two handsome young people held apart by racial prejudice is treated with simple sentiment, mingled with a pleasant humour. Though it seems inevitable from the first that the course of their true love will not run to the conventional end, their fate will be felt with pity but not excessive heart burning on the part of the audience. One feels that both are sufficiently young and attractive to find speedy consolation among their own people.<sup>110</sup>

*The Picturegoer* reviewer waxed poetic about Janice, “the American girl who was ready to face social ostracism for the sake of her love.”<sup>111</sup> Though none saw the plot as objectionable, all saw the ending as inevitable.

Another of the most widely distributed films of the era, John Ford’s *The Black Watch*, elicited negative responses based on what reviewers saw as the far-fetched images of India that dominated the film.<sup>112</sup> In many ways *The Black Watch* fit more closely with those of the post-1934 period than those of the silent era, a story of adventuring British soldiers and treacherous Indians in the Khyber Pass. On the eve of the First World War, Captain Donald Gordon King (Victor McLaglen) is pulled from his regiment. His fellow soldiers assume he is simply a coward, but in reality King has been chosen for a secret mission in India to rescue British soldiers being held captive by a renegade tribe. While audiences would critique later, similar films for their misrepresentation of British characters, *The Black Watch* received critiques for its unrealistic portrayals of Indian life. *Kine Weekly*’s reviewer saw the film as over-the-top:

An artificial atmosphere prevails when the locations shift to India, for the scenes of the natives’ strongholds which are supposed to adjoin the Khyber Pass, while clever in stagecraft, are also somewhat stagey. Occasional lapses on the part of the natives to chant with a nasal twang also appear a little incongruous. There are

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> “Son of India,” *The Picturegoer* (5 March 1932), 19

<sup>112</sup> Americans familiar with Ford’s work likely know this film as *King of the Khyber Rifles*, its title for American distribution.

a variety of elaborately displayed settings; in fact, over-elaboration is one of the faults...<sup>113</sup>

In the end, however, he believed it would inevitably be popular with audiences.

*Light of Asia* seems to have found its niche in the British market because British audiences could reinterpret the film in order to fit their own interests. Rai had intended the film to stand as proof the power of Indian culture and the invalidity of the Raj. Instead, however, British audiences understood the film as a kind of travelogue, a glimpse at what they believed to be ‘real’ India. Rather than seeing its Indian cast, Indian story, and Indian backdrop as a contemporary commentary, the interpreted the film as a voyeuristic glimpse at India, one that reified their own power as audiences.

**“A Riot of Oriental Splendour”: Exhibiting *Light of Asia***

While I have argued that *Light of Asia* was a relative success in the British market based on its long run in London, the film only ever found exhibition in one venue—London’s Philharmonic Hall. This limited distribution further suggests the narrow and somewhat unintuitive ways in which audiences understood the film. Rai saw his film as part of a genre of mythological and biblical films. But the way the Philharmonic Hall exhibited the film help to redefine its generic categorization. Rai marketed the film as a reverent depiction of Indian mythology; his British audiences came to see the film as a depiction of contemporary India. Exhibitors at the Philharmonic Hall further reinforced this perception, exhibiting the film as a kind of travelogue.

Travelogues—a term coined by filmmaker and adventurer Burton Holmes—had their heyday in the era of silent films, born in the era of the touring lecture series of the

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<sup>113</sup> “The Black Watch,” *Kine Weekly* (25 July 1929), 43.



nineteenth century.<sup>114</sup> A natural progression from lecturers' photographic slides, silent films became a new way for speakers to illustrate their lectures at the turn of the century.<sup>115</sup> According to film scholar Tom Gunning, the film represented merely a moving backdrop to the lecture, "the verbal discourse simultaneously assuring the temporal and geographical continuity accompanied by continuous communication with the audience."<sup>116</sup> Over time the practice of using films to illustrate lectures became just one form of exhibiting travelogues, which would also "be shown as brief segments in a variety format of mixed genres" with short travel films often finding their way into longer nightly film programs, and as footage in fictions films, "with travel providing the background for fictional action."<sup>117</sup> Such films would directly influence what would later become the documentary film movement.<sup>118</sup>

At the time of *Light of Asia*'s release, travelogues were a common form of film entertainment that offered audiences the promise of journeying to foreign places, especially around the empire. Gunning argues that "in the modern era the very concept of travel becomes intricately bound up with the production of images."<sup>119</sup> According to Gunning, travelogues grew out of the same modern impulse for spectacle that drove the

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<sup>114</sup> Richard M. Barsam, *Nonfiction Film: A Critical History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), 42.

<sup>115</sup> Tom Gunning, "'The Whole World Within Reach': Travel Images without Borders," in Jeffrey Ruoff, ed., *Virtual Voyages: Cinema and Travel*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 25.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 26. For another discussion of the inclusion of travelogues in film programs, see Stephen Bottomore, "Rediscovering Early Non-Fiction Film," *Film History* 13, no. 2 (2001), 160-173.

<sup>118</sup> The father of the documentary film Robert Flaherty cited, for example, the work of Martin and Osa Johnson, especially their 1912 film *Jack London in the South Seas*. The Johnsons saw themselves primarily as photographers, adventurers, and naturalists and traveled throughout East and Central Africa, the South Pacific, and Borneo. They earned money for future trips by touring the US giving lectures, slideshows, and screening their films. John Grierson, the founder of the British Documentary Film Movement, saw travelogues as "the first chapter" in the documentary film movement. See Rick Altman, "From Lecturer's Prop to Industrial Product: The Early History of Travel Films," in Ruoff, ed., *Virtual Voyages*.

<sup>119</sup> Gunning, 27.

demand for panoramas, postcards, and world exhibitions. And they fueled a desire for world travel that was becoming increasingly possible for certain classes while providing “an ersatz for actual travel for those lacking finances or energy.”<sup>120</sup> In a similar vein film scholars Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have described cinema’s

...ability to ‘fly’ spectators around the globe... The ‘spatially-mobilized visuality’ of the I/eye of empire spiraled outward around the globe, creating a visceral, kinetic sense of imperial travel and conquest, transforming European spectators into armchair conquistadors, affirming their sense of power while turning the colonies into spectacle for the metropole’s voyeuristic gaze.<sup>121</sup>

Travelogues, according to Shohat and Stam, developed alongside of colonialism, “set[ting] out to ‘explore’ new geographical, ethnographic, and archaeological territories” with the same “full-steam-ahead expansionism of imperialism itself.”<sup>122</sup> Travelogues, then, offered audiences who might never expect to leave Britain a chance to see the world and have the same sense of mastery as those who could make the journey themselves.

British cinemas screened a number of Indian and imperial travelogues in the 1920s. Both the Prince of Wales and the Duke of Connaught, for example, starred in travelogues documenting their travels through India; both films found national distribution.<sup>123</sup> In 1926 the Polytechnic Theater in London screened *India To-Day*, “a film in three parts,” each of which was “accompanied by an explanatory lecture.”<sup>124</sup> Produced by several missionary societies, the film attempted “to give so far as may be possible an insight into the lives of the people of India rather than to make play with the pageantry of exceptional occasions.”<sup>125</sup> In 1923 the Music Hall in Edinburgh screened

*Through Romantic India*, accompanied by a lecture from journalist, writer, and the

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>121</sup> Shohat and Stam, 104.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> The Duke’s film was released in 1921. The Prince’s film was released in 1922.

<sup>124</sup> “A Film of India,” *The Times*, 6 January 1926, 10.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

filmmaker, Lowell Thomas.<sup>126</sup> In 1926 aviators Geoffrey Malines and Charles Oliver set out to make a film about a motorcycling adventure across the empire, four years after a plane crash in the Bay of Bengal ended their film about flying around the empire.<sup>127</sup>

*Light of Asia* ran non-stop “Daily at 2.30 and 8.15, Sundays at 7.30” for nine months at the Philharmonic Hall on Great Portland Street in London.<sup>128</sup> This hall, which had formerly been St. James’s Hall, reopened in December 1913 as a mixed-used space, hosting films and live performances and apparently used as a showroom for car sales.<sup>129</sup> During its run, *Light of Asia* seems to have been the only show the hall hosted and would therefore have been its sole means of profit (except, of course, whatever proceeds it received from car sales). Nine months was an incredibly long run for a film, even at the Philharmonic Hall. Its previous two films—*Salamambo* (1925) and *She* (1925)—each ran for approximately three weeks. When the Hall announced that *Light of Asia* was in its last weeks of exhibition the response was apparently so great that the run was extended by three additional days. Its end at the Philharmonic Hall finally came on November 22, 1926. *La Boheme* (1926), the film that followed at the Philharmonic Hall, ran only two weeks before being replaced.

By 1926 when *Light of Asia* came to the Philharmonic Hall audiences would likely have been accustomed to the hall’s tendency to build programmes around ‘reality’ films in the tradition of travelogues and the burgeoning documentary film movement and notable foreign films not shown in other venues. In its early years the Philharmonic Hall had boasted films like *The Williamson Expedition Submarine Motion Pictures* (with “A

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<sup>126</sup> *The Scotsman*, 13 November 1923, 9. Thomas’s most famous book was *With Lawrence in Arabia* (1924).

<sup>127</sup> *The Scotsman*, 5 November 1926, 4.

<sup>128</sup> Schonfield, 557.

<sup>129</sup> “The Philharmonic Hall,” *The Times* 12 December 1913, 10.

Thrilling Under-water Fight between a Man and a Shark!”), a 3-hour programme of government-sponsored films on the Somme, *With Capt. Scott in the Antarctic*, and *Across Unexplored South America*.<sup>130</sup> Often their advertisements boasted speaking engagements by the filmmakers or subject experts as part of the programme.

By the 1920s it seemed the hall would invest even further in documentaries and travelogues. The 1922 film *Burma* and the accompanying presentation by General L. Dunsterville had done so well that the exhibitors at the hall originally planned to run similar programmes on “Spain, Timbucktoo, and Liberia” but decided instead to begin “showing ‘super films’ for short seasons.”<sup>131</sup> By “super films” the hall apparently meant internationally produced films that had been unable to find exhibition elsewhere in London. In the summer of 1922 they ran D.W. Griffith’s *The Greatest Question* (1919), a film about an orphan servant who finds she is working for murderers and was banned on its original release.<sup>132</sup>

By November of 1922 the hall was on the market and in February of 1923 the exhibition company Lecture Films, Limited had “taken a long lease of the Philharmonic Hall” and was exhibiting *Wildest Africa* (1923) in conjunction with a presentation by the filmmaker, Radcliff Holmes.<sup>133</sup> *The Times* surmised that “the film [would] be followed by others showing life and customs in different parts of the world.”<sup>134</sup> Lecture Films, Limited seems to have followed the programme laid out by their predecessors, exhibiting international interest films like the Austrian *Sodom and Gomorrah* (1922) and travelogue

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<sup>130</sup> I have not been able to establish production dates for these three films. Advertisement, *The Times* 1 March 1916, p. 5; Advertisement, *The Times* 10 April 1917, 8.

<sup>131</sup> “Film Revivals: New Plans for Philharmonic Hall,” *The Times* 6 April 1922, 10.

<sup>132</sup> Advertisement, *The Times* 18 May 1922, 12.

<sup>133</sup> “Wildest Africa,” *The Times* 3 February 1923, 8.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

presentations like *Adventure*, a film about Zanzibar, with talks given by their filmmakers or area ‘experts.’<sup>135</sup>

So by the time *Light of Asia* came to the Philharmonic Hall in 1926, the venue had a thirteen-year reputation for exhibiting top-quality fictional films from around the globe and anthropological ‘reality’ films. Audiences would likely have expected *Light of Asia* to be one or the other. But which? The most obvious answer seems to be that the film fit solidly into the hall’s tradition of global cinema. Yet rather than marketing the film as such, *Light of Asia*’s producers and exhibitors were determined to market it as a ‘reality’ film about India.

As noted earlier, most notably travelogue programmes often included comment by a lecturer. Lecturers had driven the earlier group of travelogues. But in the 1910s the entertainment aspect of the films themselves began to supplant the draw of the lecture. The emphasis of the programme shifted. Rather than the lecturer, who happened to use films as illustrations, drawing audiences, by the 1910s the films themselves attracted audiences and the lecturer merely served as a guide on the filmic journey. Recognizing this, travel filmmakers began to market their films with the option of the accompanying lecture.<sup>136</sup> By the 1920s travelogues had been “turned into commodities expected to stand by themselves.”<sup>137</sup> The work of the lecturer, describing the images and giving commentary, could be done more expediently by the work of intertitles. Robert Flaherty had, for example, accomplished this with great success in his 1922 film *Nanook of the*

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<sup>135</sup> I have not been able to establish a production date for *Zanzibar*.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> Rick Altman, “From Lecturer’s Prop to Industrial Product: The Early History of Travel Films,” in Ruoff, ed., *Virtual Voyages*, 62.

*North*, as had Merian Cooper, Ernst Schoedsack, and Marguerite Harrison in 1925's *Grass*.<sup>138</sup>

In its exhibition *Light of Asia* straddled the line between earlier and newer forms of the travelogue, making use of both intertitles and a lecturer. There may, however, have been a disconnect between these two discourses. Rai's intertitles told the story of the film, one that likely would have been unfamiliar to British audiences, explaining characters' motivations and actions. The Philharmonic Hall also hired lecturers to present as part of the *Light of Asia* programme. In its first weeks this speaker was Rai himself.<sup>139</sup> It is unclear what form these lectures took. Rai may have spoken about the making of the film, about his motivations for going into filmmaking, about India itself, all three, or something completely different. He may have spoken during the film's showing or he may have presented a lecture before or after the film itself. His inclusion, however, subtly linked his work to the genre of travelogue.

This connection may have contributed to the film's success. Whereas reviewers took a critical view of fictional India films produced in the British and American studios, they often lavished praise on travelogues of India. *The Daily Mirror* had, for example, called Commander G. M. Dyott's *Hunting Tigers in India* "a vivid historical record of a tiger hunt" and applauded its "intimate pictures of life in India."<sup>140</sup> American Frank Buck's adventure hunting films like *Bring 'Em Back Alive!* (1930), which he filmed in

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<sup>138</sup> Although Hamid Naficy argues quite convincingly that the intertitles in *Grass*, written by staff writers at the production company rather than the filmmakers, are actually disharmonious with the visuals. He explains, "While the visuals by and large document, authenticate, and celebrate the reality, bravery, stamina, and resourcefulness of the tribe, the intertitles are often ethnocentric, Orientalist, narratively manipulative, and overly dramatic." Harrison was apparently so disturbed by the intertitles that she refused to watch the film again. See Hamid Naficy, "Lured by the East: Ethnographic and Expeditions Films about Nomadic Tribes--The Case of *Grass* (1925) in Ruoff, 117-138.

<sup>139</sup> Advertisement, *The Times* 6 April 1926, 10.

<sup>140</sup> "The Film World Reviewed," *The Daily Mirror* 10 March 1930, 28.

India, sold well in the British market. *The Times* commended the producers of the 1926 travelogue *India To-day* for having “wisely preferred to give so far as may be possible an insight into the lives of the people of India rather than to make a play with the pageantry of exceptional occasions.”<sup>141</sup> *The Scotsman* praised the Prince of Wales’s travelogue film for all the “numerous little touches which go to the making of an intimate record” of his travel through India.<sup>142</sup> While reviewers accused fictional films of overdramatizing Indian life to turn a profit, they praised travelogues as having the potential to bring a taste of India to British screens.

*Light of Asia* itself has an ambivalent relationship to its generic link to travelogues. The film opens with the promise of the ersatz world travel that defined the travelogue. One of the opening titles informs the audience, “Every winter large numbers of European tourists are attracted to romantic India—land of many wonders and many contrasts.” Over the next several minutes the audience takes on the view of these tourists, as the camera moves them from Benares—“one of the oldest cities in the world—looked upon by Hindoos as the Holy of Holies”—to Jumma-Musjid, “the largest place of worship in the world.” The camera whisks audiences from streets overtaken with elephants and camels to those where streetcars and automobiles zip by. They see men bathing in the river, scan across a temple courtyard, and enter a local marketplace.

Once inside the market place, the audience stumbles on the British tourists, who actually disrupt the sense of ‘reality’ in the film. The audience now sees the tourists from the perspective of a salesman inside a booth at the bazaar. Now instead of watching Indian people moving throughout the market, the audience watches the tourists watching

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<sup>141</sup> “A Film of India,” *The Times*, 6 January 1926, 10.

<sup>142</sup> “With the Prince in India,” *The Scotsman* 20 May 1922, 9

others. Instead of watching the charmed snakes or dancing bear, the audience watches the tourists consuming these images. The tourists, not India, become the spectacle. They become the audience's surrogates in the film and alert the audience that the film is not, in fact, a documentary but a work of fiction. The story spun by the holy man is for the entertainment of tourists, not for the enlightenment of the audience.

Yet the tourists are inadequate stand-ins. The film audience has an obvious advantage over those diegetic tourists. While the latter must be content to listen to the sage's story, the film audience watches it unfold across the screen.

No contemporary reviews even mention their appearance in the film. In insisting on the travelogue qualities of the film, the tourists became the least 'real' part of the film. The tourists are the works of fiction. The "all-Indian" parts of the film became, for audiences who classified the film as a travelogue, a 'real' reflection of India.

*Light of Asia's* exhibition, then, recast the film as a modern-day travelogue by promising glimpses at 'real' India and exhibiting the film in conjunction with a live lecturer, even as Rai's explanations of the film and the film itself resisted such interpretation. But this reinterpretation, I would argue, may have accounted for the film's success in Britain. While British audiences would also understand Rai's later films as documenting images of modern India, none of his subsequent releases would recapture *Light of Asia's* success, even though critics seemed eager for more films from Rai and from India in general. In fact, as I will show, *Light of Asia* succeeded thanks to the unique moment in which it was released.



## End of the Era

Rai released four subsequent films in Britain. The success of his first project ensured that his second film, *Shiraz* (1928), received even more attention prior to its release, wider distribution to traditional commercial theaters, and interestingly, financial backing from British distributors who hoped to capitalize on Rai's films after the success of *Light of Asia*.<sup>143</sup> As they had done with *Light of Asia*, reviewers described *Shiraz* as delivering images of 'real' contemporary India to British audiences. Where Rai had attempted to show the worthiness of eastern religions in *Light of Asia*, in *Shiraz* he presented one of India's most recognizable monuments, the Taj Mahal. *Shiraz* told the story of Selima (Enakashi Rama Rao), an orphaned princess adopted and raised by a humble Indian family who know nothing of her royal lineage. They raise her alongside their son, Shiraz (Rai), who grows to love her deeply. One day Selima is kidnapped by slave traders, and while Shiraz tries desperately to save her, she is sold to Prince Khurram (Charu Roy).

Selima immediately draws attention to herself at court, refusing to bow, stirring up jealousies thanks to her exceptional beauty, and quickly catching the eye of the prince. The two fall in love, but he laments the fact that they cannot marry because she is not of royal blood. Shiraz, pining for his love, risks his life to see her and bring her an amulet she had always worn as a child. The prince discovers Shiraz in the palace and sentences him to death (by elephant trampling) but spares him at the very last moment. Shiraz gives Selima her amulet, which the court oracle immediately recognizes as that of one of the great royal families of India. Having discovered her royal heritage, Selima and the

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<sup>143</sup> On British financial backing for the film see Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, 97-98.

prince quickly marry. Selima becomes Empress Mumtaz Mahal. Shiraz is heart-broken, watching his love from afar for almost twenty years, and weeping himself to blindness.

When Selima dies, the Emperor send out a call for designs for a temple in her honor. In spite of having lost his sight Shiraz's blueprint is far-and-away the best. The emperor chooses it easily and orders Shiraz's eyes to be burned out to ensure that he can never design anything to rival Mumtaz Mahal's memorial. It is only when he discovers that Shiraz is already blind that the emperor rescinds his order and recognizes Shiraz from years ago. The two bond over the construction of the monument dedicated to their shared love.

The film might be read as a covert critique of British rule in India, like so many silent Indian mythologicals of the period.<sup>144</sup> The Emperor is capricious and determined to protect what he sees as his property; he lashes out at those around him, even at those who are devoted to him. It is altogether possible that Rai chose the story as part of his critique of the Raj, though if he did, he never publicly made mention of this intention.<sup>145</sup> Like *Light of Asia*, *Shriaz* capitalized on a story that would be familiar to Indian audiences while attracting the attention of European audiences by telling a story about one of India's most recognizable places.

Not only did Rai never suggest any clandestine motives in choosing the story, British audiences never identified it as anything but a charming fable. In fact, reviewers were enchanted by the film and their descriptions echoed reviews of *Light of Asia*. The *Picturegoer* film reviewer applauded the sincerity of *Shiraz*:

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<sup>144</sup> See Barnouw and Krishnaswamy.

<sup>145</sup> I have also not found any other scholars who have read Rai's films as colonial critiques, even though all argue that what was at stake in his filmmaking project was an extremely visual display of *swadeshi*.

There is nothing of the studio about it, Rajahs lent their jewels and elephants, but in spite of its riches—the story of the Taj Mahal—is presented with dignity and naturalistic simplicity.<sup>146</sup>

G. A. Atkinson, film reviewer for *The Daily Express*, was quick to point out that again, as with *Light of Asia*, Indian royalty offered their treasures to Rai:

Since ‘Shiraz’ was to be a representative Indian production, Mr. Rai covered practically the whole of his country, and interviewed nearly all the principal native dignitaries in search for ‘locations’ and the collection of arms, armour, costumes, decorations, and jewels characteristic of the days of the Mogul Emperors.<sup>147</sup>

And according to Atkinson, true to the “[h]istory, or legend, which seem to be much the same thing in India,” “At the fort of Agra...the company used buildings and apartments actually occupied by Shah Jehan and his beloved Mumtaz.”<sup>148</sup> R. J. Whitley, the film critic for *The Daily Mirror*, lauded *Shiraz* because,

In addition to the strong dramatic interest there is the further attraction of seeing some of the beauty spots of the East as they really are, and not as recorded in cinema studios at Hollywood. In ‘Shiraz’ we see genuine Oriental splendor...<sup>149</sup>

*Shiraz* had reasonably good British reviews, yet not the long run of *Light of Asia*. This was due, at least at least in part, to the fact that dedicated cinemas had much higher turnover than venues like the Philharmonic Hall. *Shiraz* did receive some distribution through alternative venues that identified the film as a documentary, rather than a historical or mythological film. On December 13, 1928 the Imperial Institute screened the film as part of a larger program of documentary films about the India.<sup>150</sup> While it

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<sup>146</sup> “The Pick of the Pictures,” *The Picturegoer* (October 1929), 70.

<sup>147</sup> G. A. Atkinson, “All India Brought to the Cinema,” *The Daily Express* (October 5, 1928), 9.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> R. J. Whitley, “The Film World Reviewed,” *The Daily Mirror* (September 24, 1928), 23.

<sup>150</sup> “The Film World,” *The Times* (5 December 1929), 12. Other films to be shown were *Sport in India* and *Paddy the Very Best Thing*.

appears that Rai did not attend, the film was accompanied by commentary from Sir Atul Chandra Chatterjee, the Indian High Commissioner to Britain.<sup>151</sup>

The next year, again with backing from British distributors, Rai released *A Throw of Dice*. With this film Rai returned to ancient India writings for inspiration, this time choosing a story from the *Mahabharata*, a work that, perhaps not coincidentally, greatly interested Gandhi throughout his life.<sup>152</sup> In the film, King Sohat (Rai) schemes for a way to annex a neighboring kingdom ruled by King Ranjit (Charu Roy). Sohat invites Ranjit on a tiger hunt where he plans to have one of his soldiers shoot Ranjit with a poison arrow. Ranjit is wounded but saved by a hermit in the jungle. He falls in love with the hermit's daughter, Sunita (Seeta Devi), and takes her back to his kingdom to be his queen.

Never realizing his neighbor's treachery, he invites Sohat to the wedding, and Sohat once more schemes to steal Ranjit's kingdom and, this time, Sunita as well. Knowing Ranjit's fondness for playing dice, Sohat convinces Ranjit to play for his kingdom, his wife, and his own freedom. But Sohat, the audience discovers, has brought with him a set of trick dice, and Ranjit inevitably loses. He cedes his crown to Sohat and becomes his slave, and Sohat takes Sunita back to his own palace. But soon the residents of Ranajit's palace discover the trick dice. They rally the citizens of the kingdom and take up arms against Sohat to rescue their king. They eventually reach Sohat and drive him over a cliff to his death. Ranjit is freed and vows to never gamble again.

Perhaps more than any of Rai's previous films, *A Throw of Dice* seems the most likely to be read as a critique of British rule. The story of a monarch who attempts to

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid. *The Times* mistakenly identified him as "Sir Atol Chatterjee."

<sup>152</sup> Judith Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 77.

usurp the kingdom of a friend, one who not only trusts him but invites him into his home, seems a powerful and pertinent criticism. Again, however, if Rai chose the story as a criticism of British rule, he never publicly suggested that he chose the story for anything other than its connection to an important piece of Indian literature. Likewise, no British audiences seem to have made any connection to any kind of inherent condemnation.

On *Shiraz*'s release, Collier surmised that if the group's work continued to improve, "Indian pictures will have been definitely placed on British screens and the East will have come West to stay."<sup>153</sup> Yet neither *Shiraz*, *A Throw of Dice*, nor any of Rai's subsequent releases had the success of *Light of Asia*. In fact, Rai was so disenchanted by his experience with the British film market that by 1927 he was already discouraging other Indian filmmakers from attempting to crack it themselves. In spite of its long run and the attention it received thanks to a Royal Command Performance—the attention to which Rai attributed all of the film's success in Britain—Barnouw and Krishnaswamy claim that the film was not especially profitable in the British market.<sup>154</sup> Rai told the Indian Cinematograph Committee in 1927 that Indian producers simply could not capture the international market

unless one is prepared to risk very big sums of money and produce a picture as good as possible and then go to England with some ten thousand points, take a cinema house and begin showing there, even at a loss, and try to make the widest possible publicity.<sup>155</sup>

It would seem that Rai had all the right factors for success when he released *Shiraz*: the buzz surrounding his previous film, the backing of a British distributor, critical praise.

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<sup>153</sup> Marjorie Collier, "Empire Reactions," *The Picturegoer* (December 1929), 70.

<sup>154</sup> Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, 96. It was also, apparently, a box-office failure in India, even though Indian critics praised it highly. The film was, however, a financial success in Germany and Central Europe. Rai was apparently able to secure the performance for the king and queen by pulling some strings with Sir Atul Chandra Chatterjee.

<sup>155</sup> Quoted in Jaikumar, 94.

Why was Rai unable to capitalize on his previous, although relative, success in the British market?

Between 1926—when *Light of Asia* began its run at the Philharmonic Hall—and 1928—when *Shiraz* opened at the Empire—the dramatic shift from silent to sound films had begun in British cinemas. By 1930 excitement over the ‘real’ India of the silent era—one captured in films based on Indian stories filmed in India and often exhibited in a lecture-hall setting—seems to have been superseded by an enthusiasm for sound films. Exhibitors advertised the 1929 big game film *Hunting Tigers in India*—which could easily have been fitted into the category of Indian travelogues—as the “ALL-TALKING Epic of Adventure.”<sup>156</sup> Advertisements for *King of the Khyber Rifles* (1929) described it simply as an “All-Talking ADVENTURE AND MYSTERY” with no comment on its subject matter (with the potential exception of the included headshot of Victor McClaglen in a turban).<sup>157</sup>

But on *Shiraz*’s release Atkinson was disturbed by the film’s “[p]oor English titling.”<sup>158</sup> While *Picturegoer* staff writer Marjorie Collier found “the settings...very lovely” the fact that the film was “synchronized” was very disappointing.<sup>159</sup> She lamented,

The characters being Indian speak in subtitle and the sounds are chiefly confined to shouts of the populace, surely the dullest of screen noises, and the roar of wild animals, which can more convincingly be heard at the zoo.<sup>160</sup>

Sound actually seemed to alienate British viewers from Indian films, even though the language barrier should have made little difference. These sound films had intertitles in

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<sup>156</sup> *The Daily Mirror* (11 March 1930), 5.

<sup>157</sup> *The Daily Mirror* (August 12, 1929), 16.

<sup>158</sup> Atkinson, “All India,” 9.

<sup>159</sup> Collier, “Empire Reactions,” 70.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

the exact same vein as silent films. The only difference would have been that audiences could hear that the characters were not speaking English, that they had a language of their own.

Rai tried to overcome this alienation. In 1933 he and Osten released *Karma*, which they filmed in both English and Hindustani. According to the reviewer for *The Times*, Rai's newest film had, like his previous pictures, done great service in bringing the 'real' Indian landscape to British screens. He wrote, "...more than mere accuracy of observation has gone to unfolding of the Indian landscape; the settings chosen by Mr. Himansu Rai reveal a sensitive instinct for the characteristic beauties of the country."<sup>161</sup> The reviewer argued that while the story might be fantastical, the film had "descriptive rather than dramatic merit."<sup>162</sup> He even overtly compared the film to travelogues, arguing,

When the Prince visits the Princess to celebrate their forthcoming nuptials, when the preparations for the tiger hunt are being made or when the snake charmer is applying an ancient cure to the poisoned Prince we forget the romance of which these incidents are a part and surrender ourselves to the fascination of a first-rate travel film.<sup>163</sup>

Yet his assessment was not wholly positive. According to the reviewer, this attention to the "natural" character of the landscape was overshadowed by a loss of attention to "natural" Indians.

For the reviewer, the introduction of sound had ruined the film. As he saw it, "After the production some years ago of *The Light of Asia* [sic], *Shiraz* [sic], and *A Throw of Dice* [sic], there was a great demand for Indian films, but the introduction of speech and its accompanying technical problems called a temporary halt to a successful

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<sup>161</sup> "Karma: An Indian Picture," *The Times* (11 May 1933), 12.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

enterprise.”<sup>164</sup> Hearing Indians speak in English seemed to disturb the reality effect of Rai’s silent films. The story suffered from “dialogue” that was “altogether too formal for a tale which is nothing if it is not a tale of a person.”<sup>165</sup> Unfortunately, according to the reviewer, “all the actors except Mr. Abraham Sofaer”—who had been born in Burma but had lived in London since 1915 and was generally considered a Jewish actor—were “handicapped by having to speak English.”<sup>166</sup> This in spite of the fact that Rai and his wife, Devika Rani, the two leads of the film, had both attended school and lived for significant periods of time in England. The reviewer saw their English as an unfortunate performance, “They give the impression of having been rehearsed sentence by sentence. Their pronunciation is wonderfully correct, but spontaneity is too high a price to pay for correctness.”<sup>167</sup> What he considered to be a mimicry of the English language seems to have disrupted the semblance of voyeuristically watching ‘real’ India in Rai’s silent films.

What put an end to Indian films in the British market was not, then, a British distaste for Indian films; on the contrary reviewers seemed enthusiastic for more Indian productions. Instead a fervor for sound films made the old style of Indian films seem outmoded by the mid-1930s. Rai’s attempts at utilizing sound disrupted British audiences’ imagined view of India; Indians speaking English simply did not mesh with what they understood about ‘real’ India. The coming of sound also created an increasing dependence on Hollywood films in the British market. As faltering British studios increasingly found themselves unable to keep up with the demands of the British market,

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.



English-speaking Hollywood filled the void and became the dominant force in British cinema houses. As my next chapter will show, after 1934 American tastes and interests determined the kinds of films about India that reached British audiences, and it was only then that Kipling became the premier source of plotlines for India films.

## Chapter Two

### On National Feelings and Becoming a Better Man: India Films 1935-1947

*“For those of us who saw the British empire built on Saturday afternoons in the nineteen-thirties while we sat in the dark chewing Mary Jane bars and kneading jujube candies between sweaty palms, England’s final abandonment of the world east of Suez this week was sad news. ...*

*Many of us still have a large emotional investment in the Empire we saw built in those Saturday matinees. They made us all imperialists (pace Kosygin) in the same vague sense that Westerns made us all racists. Who, after all, could possibly cheer for Eduardo Cianelli’s pit of cobras when Gunga Din—‘you’re a better man than I am, Sam Jaffe’—was willing to die to save India for the Queen, God save her?...*

*It is fashionable now to feel guilty about once having enjoyed this entertainment. ... What C. Aubrey Smith and the thin red line were up to, obviously, was the propagation of colonialism, a very bad thing for a person to confess nowadays to having once cheered for.*

*This reasoning is nonsense, of course. The fact of the matter is that at the time the British empire romances were most popular in the United States, the modern Englishman was held in such universal scorn that, when dealt with at all in films, he was never depicted as anything but a silly ass.”<sup>168</sup>*

*--Russell Baker, American essayist*

My first chapter argued that the trend towards the Kipling-esque India films in the American and British studios—those most often studied by scholars—became popular in Britain thanks, in part, to the increasing dominance of Hollywood films in the British market, not simply because of a British demand for triumphalist films about the empire. In fact, one of the overriding myths of work on empire cinema is that it clearly reflected British tastes and preoccupations. MacKenzie, perhaps the leading scholar on the twentieth-century culture of empire has argued that, “Children’s literature, educational texts, and national ritual directed towards [depicting the empire as a providing protection

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<sup>168</sup> Russell Baker, “The Observer: We’ll Head ‘em Off at Trafalgar!” *New York Times* (Jan. 21, 1968).

from the decline of the inter-war years were joined by the powerful new media of the cinema and broadcasting.”<sup>169</sup> Inherent is the assumption that these British hopes for salvation through empire were projected to audiences from British sources, whether the more traditional sources of literature and ritual or the new twentieth-century forms of media. Similarly, Richards, argues that the dominant culture of the inter-war years, “tended to be controlled and disseminated by the middle-class but consumed by middle and working classes alike.”<sup>170</sup> Again, Richards’s argument assumes that this dominant interwar culture was primarily produced by the British for the British. Chowdhry acknowledges the significant role played by American studios but assumes that “Britain and Hollywood shared a common viewpoint and the acceptance of certain ideological concerns and images in keeping with this imperial vision.”<sup>171</sup>

Even Jaikumar, whose work is uniquely attuned to the international aspects of film production, analyzes only those films produced in Britain, to the total exclusion of their far more numerous (and often more popular) by Hollywood counterparts. Her expressed aim is “to abandon the rubric of national cinemas” yet she pays exclusive attention to British studio’s imperial epics, from *Sanders of the River* (1936) to *Black Narcissus* (1947), the shifting aesthetics of which she relates to shifting colonial realities.

Yet to a large extent Britain’s filmic Indian empire was not a product of Britain’s own making in these years. Hollywood produced all but two of thirteen feature films about India screened in Britain between 1935 and 1942. As such Hollywood’s tastes, economics, and preoccupations defined these films. This chapter argues that the

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<sup>169</sup> MacKenzie, *Imperialism and Popular Culture*, 8.

<sup>170</sup> Richards, “Boy’s Own Empire: Feature Films and Imperialism in the 1930s,” in MacKenzie, *Imperialism and Popular Culture*, 140.

<sup>171</sup> Chowdhry, 1.

American origin of these later films raises questions about the extent to which British national and imperial identity in the twentieth century was a national or even an imperial project. As the quote from Russell Baker at the beginning of the chapter suggests, Hollywood's depictions of colonial India straddled the line between the demands of American and British audiences. These divided 'loyalties' meant that, even in the heyday of India films, these movies never clearly reflected British preoccupations or national sentiments.

This chapter argues that Hollywood's profit aims and American foreign policy and public opinion shaped India films far more than any British imperial mania. These films demonstrate the extent to which the British lost control of the cultural production of their empire and the extent to which British visions of India came from sources that had an ambiguous relationship to Britain's empire, one that became even more ambiguous as the decade came to a close.

### *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*

As early as 1974 Richards queried, "A question often asked and not yet satisfactorily answered is: What was the fascination of such a subject as the British empire for the United States, which after all seceded from that concern in 1776?"<sup>172</sup> The question has been raised—and quickly dropped—in much of the scholarship on empire cinema. Richards suggested that the answer lay in some deep-seated American preoccupation with the British empire and subsequent work on the subject has more or less held this tenet to be true: India and the British Empire offered exotic sites of

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<sup>172</sup> Richards, *Visions*, 3.

adventure for white men and white audiences in Britain and America equally.<sup>173</sup> Several scholars have added that as Britain moved closer to war with Germany, Hollywood studio heads hoped to use empire films to drum up American support for the British war effort by promoting British imperial heroes. Studios were only deterred from continuing the genre *ad infinitum* by America's entrance into the Second World War and censorship at the hands of the Office of War Information, who saw these empire films as a misguided effort that only reminded American audiences of Britain's unpopular imperial stance.<sup>174</sup>

Ultimately I am most persuaded by Glancy's contention that "Hollywood's love for Britain stemmed primarily from box-office considerations rather than ardent Anglophilia."<sup>175</sup> According to Glancy, "British" films proved marketable in the U.S. because many Americans saw these stories as part of their own heritage while also giving them a sense of gratitude "that their forefathers had embarked for a new and more egalitarian world."<sup>176</sup> India films were immensely profitable undertakings for the American studios. It seems incredibly unlikely that Hollywood would have continued the cycle as part of an altruistic propaganda campaign if they had not also held the potential for incredible profits for the studios. India films offered Hollywood a chance to exploit some of Hollywood's assets—a profitable generic model, the Californian landscape, and

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<sup>173</sup> See for example Robert Stam and Ella Shohat, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Brian Taves, *The Romance of Adventure: The Genre of Historical Adventure Movies* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1993); Sue Harper, *Picturing the Past: The Rise and Fall of the British Costume Film* (London: BFI Publishing, 1994); Prem Chowdhry, *Colonial India and the Making of Empire Cinema: Image, Ideology, and Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Priya Jaikumar, *Cinema at the End of Empire: A Politics of Transition in Britain and India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

<sup>174</sup> See for example Clayton Koppes and Gregory Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (New York: Free Press, 1986); H. Mark Glancy, *When Hollywood Loved Britain: The Hollywood 'British' Film, 1939-1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).

<sup>175</sup> Glancy, 6.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

a significant British ex-patriate community—and American studios could produce them relatively inexpensively and with relatively little effort.

Much previous work has seen 1935's *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* as the start of the cycle of India films. As I have shown in my previous chapter, this cycle had a much longer history that has been ignored. But *Bengal Lancer* was definitely a defining work in the genre of India films. In order to understand the form that Hollywood's later India films took, it is essential to understand *Bengal Lancer*'s box office success, which came to define the structure and production of India films.

The film left an indelible mark on the genre of India films. Later that same year, Laurel and Hardy parodied the film in *Bonnie Scotland*, and in 1939 Paramount remade the film as a Western, *Geronimo*. Its success sparked a stream of thinly veiled imitations—*Charge of the Light Brigade* (1936), *Storm Over Bengal* (1938), and *Gunga Din* (1939), just to name a few. Already in March 1935 Gaumont-British announced that they would produce an adaptation of Kipling's *Soldiers Three* as a “reply to *The Lives of a Bengal Lancer*.”<sup>177</sup> Most importantly, the financial success of *Bengal Lancer* marked a shift to Hollywood's domination of India film production and the focus on India as a site for adventure epics.

While the completed film became one of the most successful of the decade, its beginnings in early 1930s were rather inauspicious. Paramount acquired the rights to Major Francis Yeats-Brown's book of the same name, a memoir of his years stationed with the British Indian Army in India's North-West Frontier, before it was even

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<sup>177</sup> “Gaumont-British Empire Conscious,” *The Picturegoer* (9 March 1935), 6-7. In the end, *Soldiers Three* would not make it to screens until 1951, and it would be MGM, not Gaumont-British, that would accomplish the task. For more information on the long and winding road to *Soldiers Three*'s release, see Jeffrey Richards, ‘Soldiers Three’: The ‘Lost’ Gaumont British Imperial Epic,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 15/1 (January 1995), 137 – 141.

published in 1930.<sup>178</sup> Paramount promised the film's imminent release for several years and included the film in its annual release program three times before its eventual release in 1935.<sup>179</sup> Expensive and arduous location filming in India by famed photographer Ernest Schoedsack, a major overhaul of Yeats-Brown's story, and a revolving door of directors (Stephen Roberts replaced Schoedsack, and in a last-ditch effort to produce the film at all, Henry Hathaway replaced Roberts in 1934) and key actors (Gary Cooper for Fredric March, Franchot Tone for Henry Wilcoxson, C. Aubrey Smith for Clive Brook) all contributed to the film's long delays.<sup>180</sup> Paramount premiered the film in the United States in January 1935 and in London in February 1935. Over the next six months, the

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<sup>178</sup> The American Film Institute Catalog, "The Lives of a Bengal Lancer (1935)."

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid. In fact the story of *Bengal Lancer*'s release is the stuff of Hollywood legend. Having jumped at buying the rights to produce Yeats-Brown's story as a film, likely without fully understanding what they were acquiring, Paramount found themselves with a memoir that was decidedly un-filmic. Over the next four years they would employ a number of screenwriters to "fix" the story. Playwrights and sometime screenwriters Laurence Stallings and Maxwell Anderson, who had collaborated to write the 1924 success *What Price Glory?*, made individual attempts at the script. Alexander Nicholayevitch Romanoff, working under his better-known pseudonym Achmed Abdullah, was brought onto the project by Jesse Lasky, but after Abdullah dawdled for several years, head of production Emmanuel Cohen dispatched more staff writers—Waldemar Young, John L. Balderston, Grover Jones, and William Slavens McNutt. In 1935 on the eve of the film's British release, *Film Weekly* joked that "it took five able-bodied men, with a choice assortment of names, to render Yeats-Brown's story sufficiently unrecognizable for film purposes." In the meantime, Paramount had dispatched Schoedsack (along with his wife, brother, cameraman, and a number of assistants) to India to begin filming location footage. Schoedsack spent three months in India's North-West Frontier and brought back thousands of feet of film, all of which was rather quickly shelved. Schoedsack resigned his post soon after and was replaced by Stephen Roberts. Costs mounted as the executives at Paramount waited for the story to finally be finished. When Paramount appointed Cohen head of production in 1932, *Bengal Lancer* was one of the thorns in his side. The company was bleeding money, and Cohen was determined to see the investments made in films like *Bengal Lancer* finally pay off. By this point, however, Twentieth Century was busily working on its own India epic, *Clive of India*. Cohen quickly realized that if the film had any chance of being a financial success, it would have to be released before Twentieth Century could get *Clive* to theaters. He turned Roberts loose and hired Hathaway to finally finish the film. Hathaway had a reputation for being able to turn out Westerns in short order and at low costs. Cohen figured with all the riding and shooting, *Bengal Lancer* would be little different from Hathaway's typical projects, but he made clear to Hathaway that there was only one reason he was being brought on board—to get the thing finished quickly and cheaply. In the midst of Hathaway's filming Wilcoxson left the film. He blamed his departure on a scheduling conflict with Cecil B. DeMille's *The Crusades*, but by all accounts it seems likely that he simply fancied himself too important to play second fiddle to the likes of Gary Cooper. When Franchot Tone came onboard to replace Wilcoxson, Hathaway spent four days refilming all of Wilcoxson's scenes. Even so, he more than fulfilled Cohen's demands.

film's circulation spread, as was the pattern with many new releases, from urban centers to suburban and finally to rural flea pit theaters.

The delays seemed to have only piqued the public's interest.<sup>181</sup> It was a runaway hit in the U.S., Britain, and Austria. In Germany, the film was allowed to be shown on public holidays, an exception to the legislation that banned the screening of films on holidays.<sup>182</sup> In a 1935 poll, American critics voted it one of the ten best films of the year, and it received an award from the Hollywood Foreign Press Society.<sup>183</sup> It was nominated for six Academy Awards in 1936—Best Art Direction, Best Sound, Best Film Editing, Best Writing, Best Director, and Best Picture—and Clem Beauchamp and Paul Wing won the award for Best Assistant Director.<sup>184</sup> It was one of the few films screened by King George V and Queen Mary, and Hitler biographer John Toland claims it was one of Hitler's favorites, one that he saw three times and was required viewing for members of the SS.<sup>185</sup>

The film told the story of the 41<sup>st</sup> Bengal Lancers, under Colonel Tom Stone (Sir Guy Standing), stationed in the hills of India. Lt. Macgregor (Gary Cooper), a Canadian with a thirst for adventure, is joined by new arrivals Lt. "Fort" Forsythe (Franchot Tone) and Colonel Stone's estranged son, Lt. Donald Stone (Richard Cromwell), who has just graduated from Sandhurst. Macgregor sees the cold relationship between Stone and Donald and quickly takes the young man under his wing. Meanwhile, the rebel leader Mohammed Khan (Douglas Dumbrille) is planning to steal a large shipment of

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<sup>181</sup> It should be noted that *Bengal Lancer* was not a success everywhere. The film was, for example, banned in China because it depicted "the British downtrodding of Oriental races." See Motion Picture Association of America Production Code Administration records, 1927-1967, "The Lives of a Bengal Lancer," Collection 102, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles.

<sup>182</sup> John Toland, *Adolf Hitler: The Definitive Biography* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 391.

<sup>183</sup> AFI Catalogue, "The Lives of a Bengal Lancer (1935)."

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> Toland, 391.



ammunition headed to the base and use it for an attack on the Lancers. The naïve young Donald is tricked by a beautiful woman working for Khan and finds himself kidnapped and held for ransom. Colonel Stone refuses to risk the lives of his soldiers to save his son, so Macgregor and Fort defy orders and set out to find Donald themselves. Khan catches them, imprisons them with Donald, and tortures them for information on the ammunition shipment. Angry at his father and overwhelmed by pain, Donald gives all the details. Macgregor and Fort manage to escape, and Macgregor gives his own life, setting fire to the ammunition shipment, and saving his fellow Lancers in the process. With his dying breath, he asks Fort not to reveal Donald's betrayal to his father. Donald for his part redeems himself by killing Khan; he and Fort are decorated for their efforts. In the closing shots, as strains of "God Save the Queen" swell, Macgregor is posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross.

The *Bengal Lancer* formula came to dominate the genre of India films for the next seven years. Several later films followed the exploits of British officers living, almost without exception, along the Khyber Pass. In these films local tribes threaten an uprising and British soldiers rush instinctually into the fray. One man often gives his life to save his fellow soldiers, but gaining the undying admiration of his comrades in arms and his place in history as a savior of the British in India. Of Hollywood's eleven India films, seven followed this formula more or less to the letter.

Yet the fact that the *Bengal Lancer* formula would come to dominate the genre was not readily apparent in 1935. At the same time that Paramount was preparing to release *Bengal Lancer*, Twentieth-Century was putting the finishing touches on its own India film, *Clive of India* (1935). *Clive* was distinctively different from *Bengal Lancer*.

Rather than focusing on adventure, Darryl Zanuck saw the film as potentially successful period film in the tradition of such recent successes *Private Lives of Henry VIII* (1933) and *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (1934). *Clive* seems to have been completely overshadowed by the prescient success of *Bengal Lancer*; adventure won out over historical melodrama. In fact, had *Clive* been released only a few months earlier, the entire genre of India films might have looked completely different.

Having discovered a successful formula in the *Bengal Lancer* blueprint, Hollywood seized on the genre of India films as potential box office smashes. By 1942 all of the major American studios and several of the minor studios had produced their own India films. Aside from capitalizing on a successful formula, Hollywood studios could produce India films relatively cheaply and quickly by reusing costumes and sets from “British” historical films and capitalizing on land already purchased or easily leased in southern California. The same sets that they used to churn out films about the American West could easily be transitioned into the Khyber Pass with no extra cost to the studio. While Schoedsack spent six weeks in India and brought back thousands of feet of film, by the time the film was finally released in 1935, almost all of his work had either been lost or cut.<sup>186</sup> Most of the film was shot in California. The success of the film proved that expensive and time-consuming trips to capture ‘authentic’ footage were unnecessary; a California backdrop was workable and much more cost-effective. No other American studios invested in an overseas trip for filming an Imperial epic. In fact by the time RKO produced *Gunga Din* in 1939, director George Stevens used a painted

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<sup>186</sup> AFI Catalogue, “Lives of a Bengal Lancer.”

backdrop was for at least one scene.<sup>187</sup> *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, *Charge of the Light Brigade*, and *Gunga Din* all used the same filming locale in Alabama Hills, located about 200 miles north of Los Angeles.<sup>188</sup>

By reusing sets and landscapes, Hollywood studios could easily outproduce any British studio competition. Alexander Korda, the only British studio head to issue an India film between 1935 and 1946, felt this acutely. When he decided to sponsor Robert Flaherty's documentary project in India, which would become *Elephant Boy* (1937), he allowed the director some free rein while dispatched to India. What Korda had anticipated would cost his company, London Films, around £45,000 ended up costing £147,895, which included 53 days of studio filming that Korda thought necessary in order to salvage the project.<sup>189</sup> He invested in some location filming for *The Drum* before finishing the film in the foothills of Wales, a much less expensive approach.

If Hollywood's easy access to mesas and deserts was a natural resource, their other primary resource in producing India films was definitely an import. In the 1920s Hollywood cultivated what would become a sizeable British expatriate community. Glancy points out that signing top stars from other countries was a "tried and true method for Hollywood, which had a long history of dealing with foreign competition by moving into its backyard and appropriating its best talent."<sup>190</sup> Many British stars were easily persuaded to abandon the cold winters and meager paychecks for a comfortable life in Southern California, and as Glancy suggests, this move often proved profitable for

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<sup>187</sup> "Trivia for *Gunga Din* (1939)" (Internet Movie Database: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0031398/trivia>, accessed 20 March 2006).

<sup>188</sup> These local sets could, in fact, be used to great effect. Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. claimed that he had met several Indians in his travels who, after having seen *Gunga Din*, had insisted that the scenes had been filmed at the actual Khyber Pass in northwest India.

<sup>189</sup> London Films Production Costs 1935-1937, David Cunyngham Files (London: British Film Institute).

<sup>190</sup> Glancy, 23.

Hollywood, making their films even more marketable in Britain by employing already well-known British stars. Ironically, this group of British expatriates has come to be known as the “Hollywood Raj.”<sup>191</sup>

Imperial epics capitalized on the existing status of (and existing contracts with) British stars. Ronald Colman, who had signed with Twentieth Century for *Bulldog Drummond Strikes Back* (1934), was enlisted to play the title role in *Clive of India*. When Will Rogers died just a few months after the merger between Twentieth Century and Fox, Shirley Temple became the center of the studio’s new game plan. But by 1937 Temple, who was nine years old, had lost some of her baby-faced appeal. The storyline for *Wee Willie Winkie* (1937) highlighted Twentieth Century’s little star while pairing her with veteran talent. *Variety* surmised that

Darryl Zanuck and 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox recognized the need of transition and the resultant film is the combination of some top authorship, expert supervision and directorial and supporting acting which includes John Ford as director and Victor McLaglen as co-star. Miss Temple is surrounded but not submerged by Academy prize-winners.<sup>192</sup>

Academy Award winners bolstered Temple’s star-power, and British actors like McLaglen and Smith made the film a successful contribution to the Imperial epic genre. *Gunga Din* gave RKO the opportunity to highlight their biggest star, Cary Grant, pairing him with fellow Raj member Victor McLaglen.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> For an anecdotal treatment of this community see Sheridan Morley, *Tales from the Hollywood Raj: The British, the Movies, and Tinseltown* (New York: Viking Books, 1983).

<sup>192</sup> “Wee Willie Winkie,” *Variety* (30 June 1937).

<sup>193</sup> Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 327.

If “Raj” actors appealed to both British and American audiences, studios hoped that “Raj” writers and directors would give their projects an air of respectability and realism. Glancy argues,

British writers were thought to be essential for ‘British’ films. Even if they only contributed dialogue or wrote scripts in tandem with veteran American screenwriters, they were seen to provide the necessary British perspective to the films. British directors were also called upon to lend their expertise to ‘British’ films.<sup>194</sup>

This in spite of the fact that many “Raj” writers and directors had been long-estranged from their homelands and likely had little more perspective on of their countrymen’s current political views on India than their American co-workers. Private companies and retired army officers offered advisory services to the studios to ensure that depictions of the British military were accurate even though most were 20 years removed from their own military careers. Hollywood’s policy in terms of India films seems to have been “any Brit will do.” Beyond this expatriate community, Hollywood more or less ignored British input, as I will show in the next section.

### **The Limits of the BBFC**

British officials were also given a chance to weigh in on these projects before studios released an India film to the British public. In theory British officials were supposed to have an element of influence over the images of the Raj in Hollywood films, and Hollywood was supposed to monitor closely how they represented the British in films. In practice, Hollywood’s interactions with British officials on the subject of India films actually demonstrates what little control the British maintained over images of the empire.

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<sup>194</sup> Glancy, 159.

The British industry instituted the BBFC, which I discussed briefly in my last chapter, in 1912. Much like its American counterpart, the PCA, the BBFC was a vehicle for centralizing censorship in the hopes of wresting this power from local authorities. The goal was to ensure more consistent releases across the nation and avoid having films banned piecemeal by local censorship boards. The BBFC's recommendations applied equally to the British and Hollywood studios. In its first two decades the BBFC concerned itself primarily with viewing, commenting on, and rating already completed productions. By 1930, however, they had begun to encourage studios to submit scenarios and scripts for approval or suggestions before the studios invested any further funding in a project.

While the BBFC did not require the American or the British studios to submit scripts, it often proved beneficial to do so, especially after the financial crisis of 1929 seriously threatened the studios' profits. The BBFC advised studios of any potential problems before the studio wasted funding in a project doomed to be censored. Most of the major American studios chose to submit scenarios to the BBFC, especially when their film involved a "British" theme. The British market had long been a key export market for American films, but with the advent of sound (and the expense of captioning and dubbing films into various languages) and increasing state limits on American film imports in many European countries in the 1930s, the British market became absolutely essential to the success of the American film industry.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> See, for example, Richards, *Dream Palace*, op. cit.; Glancy, op. cit.; Vasey, op. cit.

Most Hollywood projects recouped their production costs with their American ticket sales and made all of their profits in the British market.<sup>196</sup> For United Artists, the “British market accounted for nearly 80 per cent of the company’s profits” because overhead costs in the States were so high.<sup>197</sup> United Artists may have been an extreme example—their contract with Charlie Chaplin, the most popular British expatriate in Hollywood in the early 1930s, made them especially popular in the British market—but the other major Hollywood studios also depended on success in the British market in order to turn a profit. Producing a film that would inevitably be banned in their most lucrative overseas market was not worth the risk.

The BBFC scenario reports that survived the London bombings of 1941 form the primary cache for information on the day-to-day workings of the BBFC and suggest that while BBFC censors might advise American studios on their India films, their suggestions seem to have carried little weight in Hollywood. In theory, British censors should have had some control over the images of British in Hollywood’s India films since a failure to meet the BBFC’s standards often meant censorship throughout the country (and even throughout the empire), which would have significantly threatened a studio’s profits.<sup>198</sup> On paper, the BBFC’s standards were rigorous, and scholars have assumed that the BBFC wielded an enormous amount of power over Hollywood’s projects. Richards, for example, describes the censors “enforc[ing] ‘O’Connor’s 43’ with rigour” and dedicates a full third of his book to demonstrating the ways in which BBFC

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<sup>196</sup> For an in-depth quantitative analysis of this see John Sedgwick, *Popular Filmgoing in 1930s Britain: A Choice of Pleasures* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000).

<sup>197</sup> Tom Ryall, *Britain and the American Cinema* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2001), 43.

<sup>198</sup> Vasey, 145.

ensorship helped to maintain the social status quo.<sup>199</sup> Glancy describes the PCA as taking the BBFC so seriously that “the regulations of the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC), which were in many respects more rigorous than those of the production code, became a *defacto* code at the Hays office.”<sup>200</sup> If this was generally the case, Hollywood often ignored BBFC concerns about India films.

As I mentioned briefly in my last chapter, many of ‘O’Connor’s 43’ applied directly to India films, including bans on “Themes and references relative to “race suicide,” “Scenes holding up the King’s uniform to contempt or ridicule,” and the most obvious example, “Subjects dealing with India, in which British Officers are seen in an odious light, and otherwise attempting to suggest the disloyalty of Native States or bringing into disrepute British prestige in the Empire.” Originally ‘O’Connor’s 43’ were intended through to govern only until the end of the First World War. Concerns on the homefront after 1919 encouraged censors to maintain many of these guidelines in the interwar period and expanded them to include rules against unfavorable images of “Indian religious beliefs and British maltreatment of colonial people” and “scenes calculated to inflame racial hatred.”<sup>201</sup> By 1926, the BBFC had more or less codified a set of guidelines that would last through the Second World War. These included many that applied to the themes of India films:

RELIGION

6. Travesty and mockery of religious services. ...

POLITICAL

5. White men in a state of degradation amidst native surroundings

8. Equivocal situations between white girls and men of other races.

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<sup>199</sup> Richards, *Dream Palace*, 111.

<sup>200</sup> Glancy, 42.

<sup>201</sup> James C. Robertson, *The British Board of Film Censors: Film Censorship in Britain, 1896-1950* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 19.



## MILITARY

### 1. Officers in British regiments shown in a disgraceful light.<sup>202</sup>

But as I will show, the BBFC implemented these guidelines only sporadically, and when they did, they did so from a place of limited influence.

In the U.S., the PCA had taken its own steps to ensure that Hollywood films would be reliably released in the British market, and these were, in fact, based on British censors' own concerns. The Production Code's regulations on the representation of foreign nations was the brief "National Feelings clause": "The history, institutions, prominent people and citizenry of other nations shall be represented fairly."<sup>203</sup> Glancy argues that this clause was of the utmost importance to the American film industry, a means for avoiding having films banned in profitable foreign markets.<sup>204</sup> Head of the PCA, Joseph Breen often sent notes to the studios about scenes that might be acceptable in the U.S. but would likely not pass muster with the BBFC.<sup>205</sup>

Primary responsibilities for advising on projects after 1934 fell on two censors at the BBFC. The first was Colonel Hanna, who served both as the chief censor and as the Vice President of the BBFC from 1922 until 1948.<sup>206</sup> Hanna was 51 when he took his position at the BBFC. He was a highly-decorated, thirty-year veteran of the Royal Artillery, so he had a special interest in depictions of the British military. These often formed the basis for his critique of India films. India films struck a raw nerve with Hanna, who had been stationed in India for a good part of his career.<sup>207</sup> He often felt they totally misrepresented the British Army, India, and Anglo-Indian relations. Richards

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<sup>202</sup> Reprinted in Robertson, Appendix A.

<sup>203</sup> Quoted in Glancy, 41.

<sup>204</sup> Glancy, *op. cit.*

<sup>205</sup> Glancy, *op. cit.*

<sup>206</sup> Richards, *Dream Palace*, 140.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*

has argued that “since the bringing of the British army into ridicule could be grounds for disallowing a film altogether...the Colonel’s very firm views on the subject of the army must always be taken seriously [by filmmakers].”<sup>208</sup> But Hanna’s often lengthy complaints about Hollywood’s India films often fell on deaf ears.

In April 1934, Miss Nancy Shortt joined Hanna as the BBFC’s junior script reader. Shortt was the daughter of BBFC President Edward Shortt and became Mrs. Crouzet after her marriage in 1937.<sup>209</sup> She had none of Hanna’s personal frustrations about India films. Her concerns, unlike those of her partner, were with foul language and all things “horrible” and “gruesome.”<sup>210</sup> When it came to India films, she tended to be far more likely to ask for line deletions than to question plot themes or national or imperial representations.

In theory, then, the BBFC’s stringent rules, Hollywood’s and the PCA’s focus on maintaining amicable Anglo-American relations in the film world, and Hanna’s personal interest in India films might have meant that British concerns played key roles in the Hollywood films. The fact of the matter was that in the average production, the BBFC had little control, and Hollywood and the PCA remained out of touch with British concerns. Unless the censor clearly assured the studios that they would swiftly and surely censor the film, their suggestions to make India films ‘more accurate’ or more amenable to British (or even Indian) audiences, no matter how pleading or demanding, generally went unheeded. At the PCA, Breen often expressed concerns about British reception, but many of his comments seem to have been misguided and did not match the concerns expressed by the British censors.

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Richards, *Dream Palace*, 141.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid, 142.

Take *Clive of India*, for example. In March 1934 MGM had requested that Colonel Hanna attend a performance of R. J. Minney's play *Clive of India* in order to determine its viability for use as the basis for an MGM screenplay. Hanna saw no problems with the story from a British standpoint, explaining, "Apart from a few expressions in the nature of swearing there is nothing in incident or dialogue to which we would take exception."<sup>211</sup> Twentieth Century Pictures would ultimately make the film in 1935. When they submitted their scenario to the BBFC in October of 1934, Miss Shortt called the plot "quite free from objection," and pointed to only a few minor complaints, including deleting the phrase "Where the blasted devil" and the word "bloody" and requiring that depictions of the "Black Hole of Calcutta...not be too gruesome or horrible."<sup>212</sup> Hanna noted that "Lord Clive's conduct might be the subject of a debate in the House of Commons, but he could not as a peer be heard in reply therein."<sup>213</sup> Both were prepared to see work proceed on the project.

Breen, however, raised concerns in apparent anticipation of concerns by British censors, reminding studio executive Darryl Zanuck of the importance of seeking "expert advice on the British and Indian angles of this story in order to avoid any possibility of criticism on this score," particularly with the BBFC.<sup>214</sup> For example, he recommended eliminating a reference to Suraj Dowlah, the villain of the film, as a "savage degenerate."<sup>215</sup> Zanuck took serious umbrage at the suggestion, pointing to his own

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<sup>211</sup> J.C. Hanna, British Board of Film Censors Scenario Reports, 1934, "Clive of India," 18 October 1934 (British Film Institute, London), 346.

<sup>212</sup> N. Shortt, British Board of Film Censors Scenario Reports, 1934, "Clive of India," 18 October 1934 (British Film Institute, London), 346a.

<sup>213</sup> J.C. Hanna, British Board of Film Censors Scenario Reports, 1934, "Clive of India," 18 October 1934 (London: British Film Institute), 346.

<sup>214</sup> "Clive of India," Motion Picture Association of America Production Code Administration records, 1927-1967, Collection 102 (Los Angeles: Margaret Herrick Library).

<sup>215</sup> Emphasis in original. Ibid.

research into British reception as proof that the film should raise no objection on the part of British censors or British audiences. He pointed out that the play on which he screenplay had been based had been running in London for a year (and he expected that it would run successfully for another year) and had been seen by the King and Queen and the Prince of Wales. Zanuck had even gone so far as to bring Minney to Hollywood to work on the adaptation, and he claimed that Minney was “recognized as the greatest literary authority on India today.”<sup>216</sup> He was emphatic that the film was “above reproach in terms of historical accuracy.”<sup>217</sup> He explained,

It might also be interesting for you to know that all of the story is historically true even the romance; so I feel convinced we will find nothing from a British standpoint that could possibly be offensive and although the stage play openly says that all Indians are bastards, untrustworthy, etc., we have eliminated this and made special individuals our villains. The incidents with Suraj Dowlah and the Black Hole of Calcutta are, of course, correct only we have not actually shown Suraj Dowlah as the degenerate English history says that he was.<sup>218</sup>

Breen backed off, likely after seeing the BBFC’s relatively limited suggestions for revisions. When working on its own, however, the BBFC proved weak in promoting its vision of the British empire in India.

There was one notable case in which Hollywood heeded the BBFC’s threats. When United Artists first submitted a synopsis for a film based on Luis Bromfield’s *The Rains Came* in December 1937 they ran up against the full force of the BBFC’s censorship. The original synopsis from United Artists included a young American woman, Fern, attempting to seduce a Victoria-Cross-winning “son of a peer,” Ransome, in order to get away from home, and while he initially declines, the two end up sharing a

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<sup>216</sup> “Clive of India,” Motion Picture Association of America Production Code Administration records, 1927-1967, Collection 102 (Los Angeles: Margaret Herrick Library).

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

room before long. Colonel Hanna sarcastically called the synopsis, “Quite a charming little Sunday School story,” and deemed it “absolutely unfit for exhibition in this country.”<sup>219</sup> Mrs. Crouzet gave a long list of scenes and themes that would have to be deleted before the film could be screened in Britain.<sup>220</sup> The threat of a British ban may have proved sufficient because the project never came to fruition with Universal. When Twentieth-Century Fox submitted its own scenario for a film very loosely based on Bromfield’s story, it wisely presented a significantly revised version.<sup>221</sup> This successful censorship, however, focused primarily on sexual content between two of the white characters and not on the imperial themes of the film. Nothing short of outright threats seemed to sway Hollywood studios.

When Fox submitted a scenario for *Four Men and a Prayer* (1938) in June 1936 Colonel Hanna couldn’t help but scoff at the details of the story, which revolved around four sons (Richard Greene, George Sanders, David Niven, and William Henry) travelling around the globe to solve the mystery of their father’s (C. Aubrey Smith) death and avenge his name after an unjust court martial. Hanna pointed out that the colonel in the film would have been more than eighty years old at the time of his court martial since he is credited with fighting “in the Mutiny in 1857 and in the Great War 1914-1918,” yet had only managed to rise to the level of cavalry colonel, a rank generally held by men half that age.

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<sup>219</sup> J.C. Hanna, “The Rains Came,” British Board of Film Censors Scenario Reports, 1937, 16 December 1937 (London: British Film Institute) 137.

<sup>220</sup> N. Crouzet, “The Rains Came,” British Board of Film Censors Scenario Reports, 1937, 18 December 1937 (London: British Film Institute) 137a.

<sup>221</sup> “The Rains Came,” British Board of Film Censors Scenario Reports, 1937, 21 November 1938 (London: British Film Institute) 81-81a.

Hanna could barely contain his contempt for the erroneous scripting of the court martial scene, pointing out that “There is no such rank as Colonel Commandant in an English Cavalry Regt.,” “the Distinguished Service Cross is a decoration only awarded...in the Royal Navy,” and that a court martial could not remove a defendant’s knighthood or Distinguished Service Order.<sup>222</sup> Moreover, the president of a court martial could not “also be the ‘chief accuser,’ nor would he make theatrical speeches about how England controlled India.”<sup>223</sup> Even so, however, there was nothing specific that he could require be changed. As misguided as Fox’s treatment was, it clearly did not rise to the level of “holding up the King’s uniform to contempt or ridicule,” a censorable offense. At best, all Hanna could do was to point out these errors in his report to Fox and chastise, “It is little touches like this that make an English story in American hands so supremely ridiculous!”<sup>224</sup>

When Fox sent a revised scenario in May 1937, Hanna believed that changes to the court martial scene were thanks to “attention...paid to our previous remarks on detail,” but a whole new crop of problems had popped up in the new draft.<sup>225</sup> This time Hanna noted that the “Prosecutor’s speech [was] quite wrong,” “The President of the Court does not call the witnesses for the prosecution nor examine them,” and “The Court does not retire to consider their verdict. They remain—others go.”<sup>226</sup> Most important to Hanna, “Public degradation of an officer who is cashiered is never done in the English

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<sup>222</sup> J.C. Hanna, “Four Men and a Prayer,” British Board of Film Censors Scenario Reports, 1936, 27 June 1936 (London: British Film Institute) 94.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> J.C. Hanna, “Four Men and a Prayer,” British Board of Film Censors Scenario Reports, 1937, 5 May 1937 (London: British Film Institute) 46.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

army.”<sup>227</sup> Still he had to admit that in spite of all these issues, he had no basis for officially censoring the film. In fact, there was nothing he could even require be deleted.

That did not deter Hanna, however, from attempting to educate the studio on British military procedures. He took it upon himself to provide a detailed outline of how he believed the scene should go and specific changes he believed should be made. He provided a script for the reading of the court martial charges and gave minute details of protocol for the calling of witnesses. He pointed out that the prosecutor “must avoid asking leading questions,” and then based on the character descriptions in the rest of the script, he surmised how each of their testimonies might read.<sup>228</sup> He even went so far as to submit an illustration, a “Rough Sketch of Court Martial Room,” on which Fox could base their set.<sup>229</sup>

Of course, these were all simply suggestions, none of which were enforceable by BBFC or Production Code standards. And Hanna’s suggestions seem not to have appealed to the production department at Twentieth-Century Fox. The final film maintained the premise that Colonel Leigh had issued the disastrous orders in a drunken stupor on the night of the ambush, even though Hanna noted that “No specific charges of drunkenness would be brought in this case. It would be deemed trivial compared to the main charge.”<sup>230</sup> That charge, according to Hanna, would have been the decidedly un-sexy “disobeying a lawful command given by his superior officer.”<sup>231</sup> In fact, the final film made no mention whatsoever of this charge, focusing instead on the accusation that Colonel Leigh had made the fateful decision that cost “sixty natives and thirty...Lancers”

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

their lives while intoxicated and the unsubstantiated—though, in the end, true—defense that his orders were sloppily written because they had been forged by an untoward impersonator. Fox flouted Hanna’s insistence that witnesses should not be present in the courtroom for opening statements and that the prosecuting lawyer would not ask leading questions. They chose to dispatch with the problem of sentencing altogether by revealing the outcome of the case through postcards to Leigh’s sons, explaining that he had been dishonorably discharged and would be returning to England.

Regardless, then, of the lip service paid to Britain’s involvement in and approval of Hollywood’s India films, these later India films took shape with almost no input from British officials. Hollywood devised India films that they believed would appeal equally to their domestic market and their essential British market. This awkward balancing act—between marketing to a domestic audience assumed to be anti-imperialist and a British market assumed to be ardently pro-imperialist—came to define the later group of India films.

**“You’re a better man than I am, Gunga Din.”**

Hollywood believed that India films needed to cater to their American and British audiences in different ways. When Zanuck agreed to take on *Clive*, for example, he was concerned to ensure that the film at once give British audiences the impression that their history had been represented fairly and reach middle-American audiences in search of a universal story. Decades later Minney recalled Zanuck’s guidance:

We’ll have to put [Clive] over big. The people in Nebraska—or anywhere else in the States for that matter—don’t know who he is. They don’t know the difference between Clive of India and cloves of India. There will have to be lots of titles; lots of titles. The public must be told that all of this really happened, that there



really was a man called Clive and that he lived in—well, whenever it was. I'll get sixty elephants and we'll have a hell of a charge for the Battle of Plassey.<sup>232</sup>

India films developed so as to excite (but not irritate) American audiences and entertain (but not offend) British audiences, even though these demands were often imagined to be at odds.

In 1939 RKO released *Gunga Din*, a film that had been in the works for almost a decade and which took its name—though not its storyline—from the Kipling poem. The evolution of the character Gunga Din over the course of the 1930s highlights to the extent to which American political agendas and popular opinion dominated the production and tenor of the later group of India films.

The first treatment for a film based on the Kipling poem was written in 1933 while *Bengal Lancer* was still in the throes of production. RKO eventually released the final film in 1939 as Britain hovered on the brink of war with Germany and Americans were hotly debating what their role in the conflict would and should be. Kipling's 1892 poem was a somewhat odd basis for a film. Told from the perspective of a working-class soldier, the poem served as a kind of eulogy for the fictional Gunga Din, a regimental water-bearer. Beaten and degraded by the white soldiers of the regiment, Din still dutifully dodges bullets to bring them water. When the narrator is shot, Gunga Din drags him to safety, losing his own life in the process. As he expires, he calls out, "I 'ope you liked your drink," the epitome of the "loyal native" motif in colonial imaginations.<sup>233</sup> Looking back on the abuse he doled out to Din, the narrator concludes, "Tho' I've beaten

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<sup>232</sup> Sheridan Morley, *Tales from the Hollywood Raj: The British, the Movies, and Tinseltown* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), 139.

<sup>233</sup> "Gunga Din" in *The Works of Rudyard Kipling* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, Ltd., 1994), 408.

an' flayed you,/By the livin' Gawd that made you,/You're a better man than I am, Gunga Din!"<sup>234</sup>

The poem posed unique problems for filmmakers. Unlike Kipling's short stories, the poem offered only the barest skeleton around which to structure a film. But investing in the Kipling name proved profitable—*Elephant Boy* (1937), *Wee Willie Winkie*, and *Captains Courageous* (1937) were all Kipling stories—and these films sold well on both sides of the Atlantic. Kipling's works were also a hot commodity in the 1930s in the British and American studios. MGM tried to get their production of "Kim" off the ground for the better part of a decade; ditto Gaumont-British's production of "Soldiers Three." Korda had already secured the rights to *The Jungle Book*. All in all, Kipling proved a safe bet when marketing to American and British audiences. So even if "Gunga Din" was not an immediately obvious choice, securing the rights to the film gave companies a shot at capitalizing on the Kipling name. Film treatments played with many aspects of the story, but all of them sought to answer one question—what made Gunga Din a "better man" than his British compatriots? And how could Hollywood make this assertion while making the film palatable to its British audiences?

Early treatments, seem to reflect the unparalleled importance of the British market and Hollywood's early attempts to capitalize on British ticket sales by producing "British" stories. In these scenarios Gunga Din becomes a "better man" by blindly sacrificing his life to save that of a white soldier. Gunga Din is a relatively insignificant character, thrown in, it seems, simply so that the studio could sell the film under the recognizable Kipling title. Implicit in these early treatments is always that the British character would never have—and would never have been expected to—sacrifice his life

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

for Din. Gunga Din is a “better man” in these treatments for recognizing and accepting his own insignificance in the colonial system, an insignificance highlighted by the character’s triviality in the very story that bears his name.

The first script for a film based on the Kipling poem was written “on spec” by Alf Goulding for The Reliance Film Company, one of Hollywood’s smaller studios, in 1933. The synopsis told the story of Buck O’Neill, “acknowledged dude of his regiment” in turn-of-the-century Calcutta, and his “three rough-house army pals.”<sup>235</sup> The four happen upon a water bearer, Gunga Din, in their adventures and decide “to keep” him because he “is accustomed to the kind of browbeating they give him,” apparently his best quality.<sup>236</sup> When Buck is wounded trying to put down a rebellion in Burma, “the faithful Ghunga [sic] Din” is killed trying to bring water to revive him.<sup>237</sup> Any lamenting the loss of their friend or mourning his death, it seems, must have been saved for another day. The British win the fight and Buck immediately marries his sweetheart and leaves for London. The titular Gunga Din is not mentioned again.

In November of 1934 the BBFC received a synopsis for a United Artists film titled “Gunga Din,” written by none other than Minney, whose book *Clive of India* would be the basis for Twentieth-Century’s film. The story revolved around Hugh Harding, son of a Victoria Cross recipient killed in the North-West Frontier. Immediately on graduation from preparatory school, Hugh flees from Britain to follow in his father’s footsteps (and avoid a sticky love affair). There he encounters his father’s faithful servant, Gunga Din, an old water-bearer. The man still tends Hugh’s father’s grave and immediately transfers his fidelity to Hugh. When Hugh leads an attack on rebel tribes

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<sup>235</sup> Alf Goulding, “Ghunga Din,” Rudy Behlmer Papers (Los Angeles: Margaret Herrick Library).

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

and is wounded, Gunga Din is killed tending to him. In a classic moment of pure curmudgeonry, Hanna scoffed, “There is no justification for connecting this story with Kipling’s poem. It is obviously written by a man who knows nothing about the Service or about India.”<sup>238</sup> Whether or not Minney knew anything “about the service or about India” he was, along with A. E. W. Mason, one of the most sought-after contemporary writers for India films among studios on both sides of the Atlantic.

By 1935 Reliance put plans for their Gunga Din film on hold “because of *Bengal Lancer*, *Clive of India*, and another similar pic,” presumably Gaumont-British’s *Soldiers Three*.<sup>239</sup> With the sudden glut of successful India films, Reliance perhaps believed their film could be more profitably produced by waiting for the India-mania to take effect and crafting a story that would set their film apart from its predecessors. In March of 1936 they finally purchased the rights to the story for £5000 from Caroline Kipling, the late poet’s widow, a purchase likely influenced by United Artists’ apparent interest in the story, in the hopes of preempting any other studios from beating Reliance to the punch.<sup>240</sup> But by June of that year Reliance had assigned the rights to the story to RKO; perhaps because Reliance was a minor studio and wagered that it could not afford to produce the film as the kind of over-the-top epic that the major studios had recently released. RKO would eventually see the project to fruition in 1939.<sup>241</sup>

When RKO brought the project out of hiatus in the spring of 1936, the first writer assigned to the production was none other than novelist William Faulkner, who had taken a comparatively lucrative position writing for the studios in order to pay his ever-

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<sup>238</sup> J.C. Hanna, “Four Men and a Prayer,” British Board of Film Censors Scenario Reports, 1934, 13 November 1934 (London: British Film Institute), 357.

<sup>239</sup> “Gunga Din,” *Variety* (9 October 1934).

<sup>240</sup> Rudy Behlmer Papers (Los Angeles: Margaret Herrick Library).

<sup>241</sup> Rudy Behlmer Papers (Los Angeles: Margaret Herrick Library).

mounting bills. His first script revolved around a story of fraternal love in the face of paternal betrayal. An officer “commits an act of folly by going through some sort of native marriage ceremony with an Indian woman.”<sup>242</sup> The marriage produces a son, Das, but the officer soon “turns white again and repudiates the woman and the son.”<sup>243</sup> Das grows up knowing what his father has done and swears vengeance. In the meantime, the officer has remarried an Englishwoman and fathered another son, Holmes. By chance the “two boys meet in France, during the World War,” neither knowing the other’s identity.<sup>244</sup> Holmes saves Das from a train wreck, and “Das develops for Holmes a doglike affection.”<sup>245</sup>

Both men return to India, where a “chieftan [sic]” tries to convince Das to aid in “a surprise attack on the British” by revealing Holmes’s true identity. The synopsis ends in a convoluted but dramatic flourish:

On the surface, it appears that Das has turned against Holmes, and is planning a second vengeance for the indignity suffered by his mother. Actually, however, he is faithful to Holmes. Through Das, who is willing to sacrifice his life before a firing squad, the British are saved. Holmes, knowing Das is his brother, is prepared to commit suicide to save Das from death. He is about to take poison, but somehow Das takes it before Holmes can. Das dies, but the regiment is saved through the information he has furnished. So Das is buried with full military honors.<sup>246</sup>

It is unclear what happened to this original scenario. Perhaps because the suggestion of an Anglo-Indian marriage would never have passed Breen’s restrictions (let alone Hanna’s) or perhaps because it contained not even a gossamer connection to Kipling’s

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<sup>242</sup> William Faulkner, “Pukka Sahib,” 10 April 1936, Rudy Behlmer Papers (Los Angeles: Margaret Herrick Library).

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

poem—not even a secondary character named Gunga Din—after the studio had invested £5000 to secure the rights to that story, the script never even left the studio gates for commentary.

Faulkner's Indian character differs slightly from the Gunga Dins in the two earlier treatments. Whereas these earlier versions posited Gunga Din as a "better man" for recognizing his own insignificance in the colonial system and therefore being willing to sacrifice his life to the system, Faulkner's treatment presents Das—an uncanny doppelganger for Gunga Din, almost Din but not quite—as a hero for sacrificing his thirst for revenge and his life for his British savior, his brother.

Three days later Faulkner submitted another draft, one that bore a much closer resemblance to Kipling's original story, not least in that it actually included a character named Gunga Din. In this version, "Din, a liar, braggart, and petty thief" is the servant of a British officer.<sup>247</sup> Dissatisfied with his current assignment, Gunga Din is determined to find himself a new officer. He accomplishes this goal "by trickery—at which he is adept—and though his former officer registers a complaint, Din becomes the servant of a young subaltern named Holmes."<sup>248</sup> In an undescribed twist of fate, Holmes comes to save Gunga Din's life. Din immediately vows himself eternally faithful to Holmes and his wife. This fidelity only becomes more deeply entrenched when he discovers that Mrs. Holmes is pregnant.

Late in his wife's pregnancy, Holmes is called away "to battle hostile tribes," and in his absence the baby is born.<sup>249</sup> He receives word that his son is healthy but his wife is

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<sup>247</sup> William Faulkner, "Untitled Story," 13 April 1936, Rudy Behlmer Papers (Los Angeles: Margaret Herrick Library).

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

gravely ill. He requests leave, but his superior officer refuses. Surveying the situation, Din drafts fake orders from the colonel and presents them to Holmes, who flies home to be with his wife. She recovers quickly, and Holmes returns to his unit. He is immediately arrested for desertion. Realizing what Din has done, Holmes tries to protect him, but Din admits his role and is sentenced to execution. Holmes sees only one option, so “[to] save Din from dishonor, Holmes gives him a loaded revolver and Din shoots himself.”<sup>250</sup> But in an effort to end the story on a high note with a positive take-home message, Faulkner wraps up, “Later Holmes and another officer, after pouring a drink for Din into the ground, themselves drink to his memory and voice the hope that when their time comes they can meet their death as bravely.”<sup>251</sup> In the end, Din redeems his earlier sins with his suicide, which he is willing to commit, not for the love of the British or in the name of the British Empire, but like Das, as a debt of gratitude to one man.

In only the handful of years between the original *Reliance* and *United Artists* scripts and Faulkner’s scenarios in 1936, Hollywood began to shift away from tributes to the British empire. Even with revisions Faulkner’s second storyline likely would not have passed PCA or BBFC muster with its suicide scene. RKO moved on to other writers. The next two treatments from two different authors, envisioned Gunga Din as an Indian iconoclast, battling against the social injustices of caste and *sati*. These treatments in many ways push the colonial system to the background of the story. Gunga Din functions in a world created by his fellow Indians, one over which the British apparently have little control. In these films, Din is a “better man” because he bucks the ‘traditional’

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

Indian system and sacrifices himself to champion the assumed ideals of western audiences.

In June 1936 Lester Cohen submitted a scenario proposal to RKO in which Gunga Din had become an outcaste after trying to stop his sister from being forced into *sati*.<sup>252</sup> He wanders the countryside, unable to find anyone who will provide an outcaste food or drink. A (presumably) British colonel's daughter discovers him collapsed on the roadside, crying out for water. Unconcerned with caste, she sees only a man in dire need of help and takes him in. He becomes her faithful servant. The rest of Cohen's outline was rather vague on detail except that the colonel should ask Gunga Din to help with investigating Indian disturbances.

Three months later, John Colton submitted his treatment for a *sati* story to RKO.<sup>253</sup> In Colton's scenario, Gunga Din saves his childhood sweetheart from committing *sati* but then needs rescuing himself when Kali priests attack him. An Englishwoman intervenes and saves him, and he is indebted to her. Later, he saves her husband's life, losing his own in the process. In a Hollywoodian flourish of coming full cycle, Gunga Din's wife, who he had saved from her first husband's funeral pyre, immolates herself with Din's body instead.

In both stories a British woman is the prime representative of imperial control. She is painted as a savior, the soft side of British power that seeks to save the Indian people from themselves. Antoinette Burton has explored tropes of salvation in a colonial context, but in the case of her sources, it was Indian women imagined to be in need of

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<sup>252</sup> Lester Cohen, "Gunga Din," 10 June 1936, Rudy Behlmer Papers (Los Angeles: Margaret Herrick Library).

<sup>253</sup> John Colton, "Gunga Din," 15 September 1936, Rudy Behlmer Papers (Los Angeles: Margaret Herrick Library).



rescue.<sup>254</sup> These scenarios gave the trope a unique twist, however. Here the white woman saves the Indian man who saves the Indian woman.

*Sati* had long been a hot-button topic of colonial policy. The British banned the practice of “widow burning” in India in 1829 after long debates and much moralizing. Historian Lata Mani has demonstrated that the banning of *sati* had little to do with the suffering of India women and much more to do with using women’s bodies as a site for contrasting the “modernity” of the colonial state against the “tradition” of Hinduism.<sup>255</sup> These debates, Mani shows, completely ignored the social and economic pressures that drove women to funeral pyres, motivations missed by contemporary detractors and defenders alike. Similarly these film treatments use women’s bodies as a site for male heroism while ignoring women’s actual motivations for immolation. While both film scenarios suggest that women might go to the pyre against their will, neither explore their motivations, though Colton’s submission suggested that women were as likely to seek *sati* out of devotion and love as to be forced into immolation.

In both cases, the scenarios backed away significantly from the earlier grandstanding about ‘superior’ British officers lording over ‘inferior’ Indians. These *sati* scenarios proposed an India in which Indians themselves could fight back against injustices in their social system, though they too dismissed a complex issue actually intimately tied to the colonial system as one of Hindu ‘tradition.’ This would be accomplished, the scripts suggested, not under a strict military regime but under the soft touch of a caring, motherly hand. Gunga Din is no longer the regimental *bhistie* of the

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<sup>254</sup> See Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

<sup>255</sup> See Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998).

poem, but an Indian who earns the respect of the British (and the audience) by being willing to stand up against imagined social injustice. The imagined “softer side” of empire might well sell better to American audiences who were increasingly disenchanted by British promises of a civilizing mission in India and recalled the promises of the 1935 Round Table Conferences that India would be given increasing powers of self-government, increasing authority to police its own social ills, just as this Gunga Din does.

It is unclear why RKO chose to pass on these two stories, though there may have been some concern that British officials would ban a project based on such a controversial issue. By October of 1936 it seemed, however, that RKO was finally making headway with the script. Howard Hawks (who was originally slated to direct the film and later fired after going over his time limits and budget with 1938’s *Bringing Up Baby*), Ben Hecht, and Charles MacArthur sent an ebullient telegraph to Samuel Briskin, the production chief at RKO:

Have finally figured out tale involving two sacrifices, one for love the other for England which neither resembles Bengal Lancers [sic] nor Charge of the Light Brigade and contains something like two thousand deaths[,] thirty elephants and a peck of maharajahs...<sup>256</sup>

The outline they produced closely resembled that of the final film released in 1939.

MacChesney, Cutter, and Ballantine, three officers in the Anglo-Indian army are laying down telegraph lines in the North-West frontier. A local tribal leader believes the telegraph poles to be crosses, symbols of a foreign religion, and insists that they be taken down. Fighting ensues and the men are sent to capture the leader, which they do. In the meantime, however, Gunga Din, the unit’s cowering water bearer who dreams of

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<sup>256</sup> Howard Hawks, Ben Hecht, and Charles MacArthur, telegraph to Samuel J. Briskin, 27 October 1936, Rudy Behlmer Papers (Los Angeles: Margaret Herrick Library).

becoming a soldier in the Anglo-Indian army, has promised to lead Cutter to a hidden treasure. When he does, the two are captured and held ransom for the leader's return. Gunga Din manages to escape and find MacChesney and Ballatine, who rush to the aid of their comrade. MacChesney is wounded in the fight, and Gunga Din is killed while valiantly dragging him to safety.<sup>257</sup> In the same vein as those early scripts, here Gunga Din sacrifices himself, not for the British imperial cause nor for ideological principles, but for the love and respect of a single man.

The script underwent almost constant revisions over the next two years, but the basic premise remained the same: Gunga Din leads Cutter to a hidden fortune, the two are captured and held for ransom, Mac and Ballantine lead a rescue mission, and Gunga Din sacrifices his own life. Writers seemed uncertain, however, about how to approach the British characters. Britain was Hollywood's biggest export market and an all-out attack on the Raj would likely have ensured a ban from the PCA (whether or not the BBFC could muster the same threat).

Yet painting Raj officers as wholesome heroes seemed likely to grate on U.S. audiences for whom the British empire was a sore subject. According to historian Lawrence James, American public opinion polls conducted in 1942 and again in 1945 showed "that 56 per cent of Americans believed that the British empire was in some way 'oppressive.'"<sup>258</sup> This was a problem for both governments to overcome in order to sell a wartime alliance to the American people, many of whom believed that Britain's primary goal in the war effort was to maintain their empire. In an extended "Open Letter from the Editors of LIFE to the People of England," *Life* explained candidly,

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<sup>257</sup> Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, "Gunga Din," 2 December 1936, Rudy Behlmer Papers (Los Angeles: Margaret Herrick Library).

<sup>258</sup> Lawrence James, *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1994), 512.

We Americans may have some disagreement among ourselves as to what we are fighting for, but one thing we are sure we are *not* fighting for is to hold the British Empire together. We don't like to put the matter so bluntly, but we don't want you to have any illusions. If your strategists are planning a war to hold the British Empire together they will sooner or later find themselves strategizing all alone. ...

So here is one concrete concession that we demand of you, as partners in battle. Quit fighting a war to hold the Empire together... After victory has been won, then the British people can decide what to do about the Empire (for you may be sure we don't want it). But if you cling to the Empire at the expense of a United Nations victory you will lose the war. Because you will lose us.<sup>259</sup>

They were especially wary of committing to an alliance in a war based on moral principles considering what they saw as the inhumane treatment of Indian nationalists, scolding

...we realize you have a difficult problem in India but we don't see that your 'solution' to date provides any evidence of principles of any kind. In light of what you are doing in India, how do you expect us to talk about 'principles' and look our soldiers in the eye?<sup>260</sup>

Historian Wendy Webster quotes a letter-writer from Florida who chastised Washington,

I wish you'd tell those stupid English to give India its freedom already or we won't play anymore. After all, if this war's being fought for liberty they'd better start in their own back yard. (That is the popular sentiment here, not just mine).<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> Emphasis in original. "An Open Letter from the Editors of LIFE to the People of England," *Life* (12 October 1942), 34.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid. Americans railed against the treatment of colonial peoples while, of course, somehow justifying the racist practices in their own country, a constant source of irritation for the British. In fact, when black soldiers arrived in Britain in the lead-up to the invasion of Normandy, locals were horrified at the segregation in the American army and the treatment of black soldiers. David Reynolds recounts this story from 1943 in Cosham,

At closing time that Saturday night, black GIs spilled out from the pubs and gathered on the road, impeding traffic. White military police (MPs) told them to move on, but one argued back. Soon he was surrounded by English civilians, commenting loudly on the action: "Why don't they leave them alone?" "They're as good as they are," and "That's democracy!" (305)

Both sides seemed to have had significant blind spots about their own society's racial biases. See David Reynolds, *Rich Relations: The American Occupation of Britain, 1942-1945* (New York: Random House, 1995).

<sup>261</sup> Webster, 32.

To overtly denigrate the British and their empire, then, was to risk censure, which seriously threatened profits. But to overtly laud the empire was to likely alienate American audiences who held disdain for the British empire. In scripting *Gunga Din* RKO needed to find ways to avoid alienating either of their primary audiences.

RKO's first full script painted its British soldiers as short-tempered, abusive, heartless brutes, unable to recognize the humanity in the Indians they are supposedly civilizing. In the June 17, 1937 script, MacChesney calls Gunga Din a "skinny baboon," a "hoodoo," and a "scabby misfit" when the water-bearer accidentally frightens Mac's pet elephant, Daisy. He threatens to "murder" the water bearer, "tear [him] apart with [his] own hands," and "plaster [the] wall with [Din's] black skin."<sup>262</sup> Later Mac beats Din after discovering that he had given the officer a stolen watch. When Cutter asks, "Do you think, Mac, 'e's got 'uman feelings—like a white man?", Mac responds, "I don't know and I don't care."<sup>263</sup> When Mac complains that the beating left him overheated, they look up to find Gunga Din, having overheard, has begun fanning the room. The two lay back on their beds and allow him to carry on.

Breen likely would have suggested this scene be cut, if it even made it past RKO's own foreign office. In the completed film, the scene with the beating and the watch have disappeared completely, and the encounter with Mac's (Victor McLaglen) elephant, Annie, tempered greatly. In the film an unidentified Indian treats Annie with an undisclosed medication—the bottle is marked only "Elixir." The Indian offers to treat Annie with a "very old Indian remedy." Mac demonstrates his uncertainty at letting the Indian treat Annie, hemming and hawing over the decision before agreeing and warning

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<sup>262</sup> Rudy Behlmer papers (Los Angeles: Margaret Herrick Library).

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

the man, “Alright, go ahead. But be careful now. If anything happens to her, I’ll... Understand? Cry my eyes out.” The overt threats and angry tirade are gone, though the Indian in the film clearly understands the implication of Mac’s emotional forewarnings. When Annie collapses after taking the medication (we find out, thankfully, that she is pulling a prank on her master), the Indian immediately flees from the stable, anticipating Mac’s angry reaction.

The final scene highlights one of the most obvious tropes of the later group of India films—positing the Raj officials as heroes while perpetually poking fun at them. The final film, like many later India films, posited British soldiers as quirky amalgams—one part dedicated to crown and country, one part abusive brutes, one part bumbling fools who, in the end, must be saved by their water-bearer. While failing to offer an overt critique of British imperialism, the final film did not miss a chance to poke fun at its imperialist “heroes” and the British imperial aspirations, playing nicely into what Glancy has identified as America’s cultural Anglophilia and political Anglophobia at the same time.<sup>264</sup>

In this way India films attempted to play both to an American audience assumed to be anti-imperialist and a British audience assumed to be pro-imperialist. Mac’s character, a rough and tumble adventurer, is brought practically to his knees by his love and concern for his pet elephant, stroking her face, calling her “baby,” and referring to himself as “daddy.” His fellow soldiers fare no better. Cutter (Cary Grant) threatens to beat Gunga Din with epic machismo, but when Annie threatens to break a suspension bridge that he and Din are standing on, he literally screeches and squeals with fear until Din manages to shoo the elephant off the bridge. Ballantine (Douglas Fairbanks, Jr.)—by

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<sup>264</sup> Glancy, *op cit.*

far the most level-headed of the three—fearlessly leads the charge against a town of rebels but is hopelessly bullied by his fiancé and is humiliated when his chums discover him helping to pick out curtains while they plot their next adventure.

The Gunga Din (Sam Jaffee) of the released film is distinct from all of his predecessors. His sacrifice is not one of redemption. This Din is unwaveringly loyal and eager to please from beginning to end. He does not give his life to save a single man. He is not an iconoclast; in fact his dream is to make his place in the colonial system by becoming a soldier for the queen in the British army. In the final product Gunga Din is “a better man” for upholding a system faithfully even though it has done nothing but abuse him. In the completed film, Gunga Din gives his life to save entire regiment, who arrive to save Mac, Cutter, and Ballatine from the clutches of the Thuggee cult. Unbeknownst to their fellow soldiers, the cult leader has used the three as bait in a trap, and they are riding towards their seemingly inevitable doom. Din and Cutter are both injured in a fight to the top of the temple’s dome to warn the regiment. In a series of cutaways, Cutter watches helpless and impotent as Din manages the climb, sounds the alarm, and is shot and killed by the Thugs.

Here his death is not meant as a redemption for past sins. Instead he proves his hitherto unacknowledged merit by giving his life to save the entire regiment—mustering the last of his strength to make the climb as Cutter gazes on—and the imperial project in India in the process. And rather than showing India’s potential worth, he proves the value of imperialism by showing the kinds of loyal, self-sacrificing subjects it produces, regardless of the fact that—according to the film—the system was run by bumbling brutes. Gunga Din becomes a colonial hero in spite of the colonial system.

Gunga Din's character, the treatment he received from both Hollywood writers and his fictional officers, evolved dramatically from the first script proposal in 1930 to the finished film project in 1939. Gunga Din was transformed from a titular yet marginal character, an afterthought to the primary goal of pandering to crucial British audiences by celebrating their imperial efforts, to a hero whose self-sacrifice and dedication only served to highlight the pompous, bullish nature of those around him. This evolution demonstrates the extent to which Hollywood's profits and American public opinion, not British imperial enthusiasm, came to define India films after 1935. If studios intended jabs at the Raj to play to American Anglophobia while coasting past British audiences, however, Hollywood missed its mark. As I will show in the next chapter, British audiences took note of these digs in their analyses of the films.

### **Decolonizing Hollywood**

By 1942 Hollywood's cycle of India films had come to an end. The end of the genre, just as the rest of its life-span, came as a result of the shifting dynamics of American public opinion and regulations placing strains on Hollywood's profit margins, not as a result of changes in British audience's desires or demands. In fact, *Gunga Din* became an unanticipated transitional piece in the genre of India films. Its original release met with little resistance in Britain or America. One scene depicting Rudyard Kipling witnessing the outpouring of grief at Gunga Din's death and returning to his candle-lit tent to compose the poem was deleted at the request of the Kipling family, not at the behest of the PCA or the BBFC. Otherwise the film passed without conflict in Britain and America in 1939.<sup>265</sup> But just three years later when RKO attempted to rerelease the

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<sup>265</sup> It is important to note that this was not the case in India where the film was protested and ultimately banned. For a full analysis, see Chowdhry, chapter 3.



film under the guise of further promoting America's wartime alliance with Britain, the OWI quickly requested that RKO change its plans, seeing the film as a threat to the war effort by reminding supposedly anti-imperialist American audiences about Britain's ongoing imperialism.<sup>266</sup> In fact, by 1942 the India film had all but run its course, thanks in large part to America's changing role on the world stage.

In 1934, just before *Bengal Lancer* and *Clive* reached British screens, the BBFC had given reports on four projects—*Bengal Lancer*, *Clive*, a synopsis from United Artists' "Gunga Din," and synopses for nine Kipling stories from Gaumont-British. In 1936, the year after *Bengal Lancer* and *Clive*, the BBFC considered four more. In 1937, there were four more. By this point, however, interest in producing India films seems to have peaked. In 1938 only two reports appear; in 1939, only three. The BBFC records for 1940-1944 were destroyed in the war, so there is no way to know for sure how many synopses were reviewed in these years. It seems likely, though, that if we had access to these records, they would demonstrate that 1938-1939 marked the beginning of the end of the India film.

The rapid decline is likely attributable to a number of factors. First, studios on both sides of the Atlantic likely feared that the cycle had more or less run its course. The scenario submitted by Republic Pictures in 1941 for a project titled "Storm Over India" was nothing more than an amalgam of previous storylines, including characters named MacGregor, a rebellious son under the command of a domineering colonel father, an explosion in the enemies' ammunition stores (all lifted from *Bengal Lancer*), an English-educated Indian prince trying to usurp power from the rightful child-prince (like *The Drum*), a trio of British soldier-adventurers, preparations for a massacre of the British on

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<sup>266</sup> Koppes and Black, 225.

the “North-West Frontier,” a torture scene, a troublesome woman, and a sacrifice for comrades, nation, and empire (in common with almost every previous India film). By this point Hanna didn’t even bother to contain his contempt for the genre that he was likely overjoyed to see fall by the wayside at the end of the decade:

Another of these conventional and spectacular stories of frontier fighting in India, written by an American with no knowledge of geography and a complete ignorance of the British Army.

Kabul is apparently the capital of Burma, which is on the N.W. Frontier of India, and approached by the Khyber Pass! ... Capt. MacGregor of the Ogilvie Highlanders, a type of English officer has no existence outside an American film studio is beguiled away from his post...

I think this is an even worse parody of the English officer than any we have had up to now, and I think we are entitled to say definitively we will not allow such caricatures to go out under our certificate.<sup>267</sup>

In the end Republic made a marginally different film, *Storm Over Bengal*, which was not much more creative than this original sketch. With little left to offer but hackneyed repeats of previous storylines, the India film lost much of its original appeal.

The British studios had, for the most part, not jumped on the India films bandwagon. In fact, after 1934 the only British studio making India films was Alex Korda’s London Films. London Films had a few things the others did not—the money to invest in lavish costumes, sets, and location filming, the expansive London film studio with recyclable sets, and of course, the Indian child star, Sabu, who I will discuss later. But by 1940 all three were slipping out of the studio’s control. The war and the seemingly incomparable ability of the Hollywood studios to outproduce the British studios had left London Films on the brink of financial ruin; one Korda biographer has

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<sup>267</sup> J.C. Hanna, “Storm Over India,” British Board of Film Censors Scenario Reports, 1939, 22 June 1939 (British Film Institute, London), 41.

described these years as “falling with style” at London Films.<sup>268</sup> Its lavish productions only masked its serious financial woes. The danger and damage of the Blitz in London meant that Korda had to leave behind his studio until the end of the war. He finished *Thief of Bagdad* (1940) in Hollywood. He filmed all of *The Jungle Book* (1942) in California. But the death knell to Korda’s India films was the loss of Sabu, who had been the main draw for London Films forays into the genre and likely the only reason Korda took on *The Drum*, *Thief of Bagdad*, and *The Jungle Book* at all. When Korda returned to London in 1945, Sabu decided to stay in the States. *The Jungle Book*, released in 1942, was his last film with the studio and London Films’ last India film.

Even with the lack of creativity in new storylines, in Hollywood the genre could likely have gone on indefinitely. If the Western is any suggestion, Hollywood had little concern for novel storylines so long as the formula remained successful and profitable. They easily could have continued to churn out cheapie India films, the same way they churned out Westerns, for the duration of the war. The breakup of the Hollywood Raj did its own damage. As America entered the Second World War some, like David Niven, returned to Britain to fight for their homeland.<sup>269</sup> Others had simply aged too much to continue to portray gracefully the swash-buckling imperial hero; by 1940 McLaglen was 57 and Colman was 49. But if Cooper’s runaway success in *Bengal Lancer* and Fairbanks Jr.’s success in *Gunga Din* were any indication, Hollywood would have developed solutions for the problem. Authenticity, as we have seen, was not an especially big concern at this point.

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<sup>268</sup> Charles Drazin, *Korda: Britain’s Only Movie Mogul* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 2002).

<sup>269</sup> Kevin Hagopian, “Gunga Din” (*Film Notes*: <http://www.albany.edu/writers-inst/webpages4/filmnotes/fnf99n7.html>, accessed 22 April 2010).

Instead, for Hollywood's India films, the end came not as a result of financial or creative crisis but thanks to a political decree. When the U.S. entered the war in 1941, the OWI quickly voiced its concerns about the genre. In the years of isolationism, Hollywood's producers had seen India films as a venue for encouraging support for the British war effort—though, as I have shown, this was likely overly-optimistic and misguided. American enthusiasm for India films did not translate directly into Anglophilia or approval of the empire. Whether the OWI sensed this disconnect as it related to films is unclear. But they expressed concern that empire films would actually alienate American support for their British allies. Glancy explains, "...OWI's surveys indicated [that] many Americans not only thought that Britain treated its colonies unfairly, but also thought that the British were fighting only to defend the Empire."<sup>270</sup> The OWI asked studios to conduct production under one guiding principle, "Will this picture help win the war?" As far as the OWI was concerned, doing anything to remind Americans about the British imperialism could only damage Anglo-American popular relations. The OWI swiftly discouraged any storylines involving the British empire, and it was under these new rules that the OWI opposed *Gunga Din*'s rerelease only 3 years after it had originally passed muster without conflict.<sup>271</sup> Yet again American concerns defined a genre that, ostensibly, had nothing to do with America.

While Hollywood had long paid lip service to concerns about British "national feelings" primarily because of profit motivations, Hollywood's ticket sales in India had been in decline since the early 1930s and therefore India's public opinion became a

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<sup>270</sup> Glancy, 190

<sup>271</sup> See Glancy, 63.

decreasing concern.<sup>272</sup> The studios seemed unable to anticipate Indian responses to their films. Chowdhry has demonstrated how films that Hollywood believed painted India in a positive light—with heroes like Gunga Din and Major Safti of *The Rains Came* (1938)—were seen by contemporary Indian audiences as insults. The Indian Cinematograph Committee banned several India films between 1935 and 1942—including, *The Drum*, *Gunga Din*, and *The Rains Came*. Each time the American studios seemed blindsided by the controversy.<sup>273</sup> By 1942, with India a major player in the Allied war effort, it seemed easier and safer to steer clear of India storylines altogether. Hollywood, and America, could no longer afford to simply concern themselves with British “national feelings,” even if their only solution for assuaging Indian audiences was by avoiding storylines that involved Indian characters.

Previous historiography has seen later India films (as part of a larger group of empire films) as proving the continuing relevance of the empire to the British people. In reality, however, only two of this group of later India films actually came out of the British studios, and British officials had little control over their content. I have argued here that Hollywood’s financial motivations and American politics and public opinion drove production of the later cycle of pre-independence India films, from *Bengal Lancer* in 1935 until *Gunga Din* in 1939, was driven more by Hollywood’s financial motivations and American international politics and public opinion than any British fascination with the empire. In fact, British responses demonstrate that their enthusiasm for Hollywood’s India films was, on one hand, ambiguous and tinged with frustrations at America’s apparent intervention into visually recreating British history, and on the other hand, not

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<sup>272</sup> Jaikumar, op cit.

<sup>273</sup> Chowdhry, op cit.

simply based in enthusiasm for stories about the British empire. There was no one-to-one correlation between the reality of India as a British colony and British audience's excitement for India films. In fact, as I show in my next chapter, British responses to imperial culture were already becoming inextricably intertwined with a belief that Britain and its empire were in a state of inevitable decline in the face of an ever-increasing American rise to power.

### Chapter Three The Adventure of Empire

As the two previous chapters have shown, there was no tangible increase in imperially themed films in the late 1930s corresponding to with increasing British anxiety about the strength of the nation and empire. My first chapter highlights a longer trajectory of films about India, that were, in fact, often divorced from Kipling-esque apologies of empire. My second chapter suggests the extent to which the later cycle of India films developed parallel to, not necessarily in response to, British concerns about or interest in the empire. This chapter argues that the ambivalence about the British empire apparent in Hollywood's treatments and American reception is also apparent in British reception of these films.

If Hollywood's India films were not a direct reflection of British preoccupations with the empire, they nevertheless sold well in British cinemas. While India films found tremendous distribution in British cinemas, British audiences did not necessarily see them as positive tributes to the empire.<sup>274</sup> Writings from British audiences highlight criticisms of India films, which British audiences felt Americanized British history beyond recognition and painted British characters, as the epigraph from the last chapter put it so succinctly, as "silly ass[es]." Audience responses suggest that India films did not reify British patriotism or assuage fears about decline by celebrating the empire. In fact, the films' American production highlighted, according to British writers, an increasing sense of British national and imperial decline.

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<sup>274</sup> In fact, even their extensive distribution tells us very little about their popularity with British audiences. The British film industry did not keep track of ticket sales and distribution in the 1930s and 1940s. Because film distributors and cinema owners purchased films in blocks from the production company, it is difficult to gauge the extent of any one film's popularity. Our best source of information is trade papers, which combined profits and surveys of cinemagoers to track film popularity. See Richards, *Dream Palace* and Linda Wood, *British Films, 1927-1939* (London: BFI Library Services, 2009).

Previous scholarship has analyzed the seemingly patriotic texts of India films and concluded that these films were boons to British patriotism, promoting a world-view in which Britons were eternally heroic and superior. Richards argued that the message of empire films was

that the British, with their long tradition of parliamentary democracy, freedom of speech and the press, the equitable administration of justice, have a responsibility to provide the world, and especially the underprivileged races..., with these benefits: Peace, Order, and Justice.<sup>275</sup>

More recent work has done little to temper this view. In her 2000 book *Englishness and Empire* Wendy Webster argues that

Empire...provided the spectacle of military displays, adventure landscapes associated with exploration and discovery, and anthropological images that demonstrated British modernity and civilization against the colonized as primitive and backward.<sup>276</sup>

Chowdhry argues that “[empire cinema] emphasized the unique imperial status, cultural and racial superiority and patriotic pride not only of the British but of the entire white western world.”<sup>277</sup>

Several scholars have used one particular piece of audience writing to gauge responses to empire films, a letter from a twenty-two-year-old female clerk to sociologist Jacob P. Mayer. In 1942 Mayer placed ads in *Picturegoer* magazine asking readers to send him their cinemagoing autobiographies. In 1948 he published these responses in *British Cinemas and Their Audiences*, making these responses easily accessible to researchers. The clerk’s letter seems to support the idea that empire films bolstered

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<sup>275</sup> Richards, *Visions*, 15.

<sup>276</sup> Webster, 14-15.

<sup>277</sup> Chowdhry, 1.



British patriotism by promoting a sense of British national superiority. She wrote to Mayer,

...there have been many pictures, mostly historical, such as *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, *Sixty Glorious Years*, etc., ...which have always been kept apart from those which I could feel were making some sort of an impression on me which would probably be for worse instead of better. These films gave me an exultant pride in my own country, and her achievements. A pride which has, I believe, helped to steady a rather impressionable and emotional nature.<sup>278</sup>

Richards believed that “there must have been many who would have echoed the twenty-two-year-old female clerk.”<sup>279</sup> Webster, on the other hand, was less willing to use this quote to make sweeping generalizations. She calls sources like “letters to newspapers,” *Mass Observation*, film reviews, and autobiographies “problematic” and wondered, “how representative is the clerk’s response?”<sup>280</sup>

As I will show in this chapter, the clerk’s letter was not representative of how most audience writings addressed India films. My sources come from three primary caches. The first are letters-to-the-editor of three contemporary film-fan magazines—*Picturegoer*, *Film Weekly*, and *Film Pictorial*. These three magazines are the only ones currently available that included letters from their readers between 1919 and 1947. In order to access these writings I surveyed every letter-to-the-editor page in *Picturegoer* from 1919 (when the magazine began publishing letters) until 1947, in *Film Weekly* from 1929 to 1939 (when the magazine merged with *Picturegoer*), and in *Film Pictorial* from 1934 (when the magazine first appeared) to 1939 (when the magazine stopped publishing letters) looking for any reference to India or India films. Copies of these magazines are

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<sup>278</sup> Mayer, *British Cinemas*, 84.

<sup>279</sup> Richards, “Boy’s Own Empire” in MacKenzie, ed, *Imperialism and Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989),

<sup>280</sup> Webster, 12.

currently available at the British Film Institute in London. I likewise consulted a cache of all unpublished letters sent to *Picturegoer* in 1940, which the magazine donated to Mass Observation, a British anthropological research organization. The University of Sussex currently holds these letters as part of the Mass Observation archive.<sup>281</sup>

The second set of writings are from two contemporary studies of film tastes—Mass-Observation’s Worktown Cinema Study and Mayer’s study of filmgoing. The Worktown Study distributed written surveys to cinemagoers in Bolton in 1940, asking for their opinions on the state of the cinema and encouraging them to return the survey by offering a monetary award for the best responses.<sup>282</sup> Mayer, a sociologist interested in the psychic effects of watching movies, solicited “cinemagoing biographies” in the advertisements section of *Picturegoer*.<sup>283</sup>

The final and smallest source of writings are published film reviews from professional writers. I have used clippings included in individual film files at the BFI and articles in contemporary film magazines in addition to consulting several newspaper databases, including *The Times* and *The Scotsman*.

In total I have collected approximately 350 pieces of writing that specifically address India films. The vast majority of these come from the period between 1930 and

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<sup>281</sup> Mass-Observation Archive, Special Collections, University of Sussex Library: Topic Collection 17/5/B, Letters to *Picturegoer*.

<sup>282</sup> These responses are available in their original form as microfiche, which I have consulted, but have also been republished in a much more readable form in Jeffrey Richards and Dorothy Sheridan, *Mass-Observation at the Movies* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987).

<sup>283</sup> Mayer published these verbatim in J.P. Mayer, *Sociology of Film: Studies and Documents* (London: Faber & Faber, 1946).

1942.<sup>284</sup> Jackie Stacey, who was likewise interested in using letters to *Picturegoer* in her own research cautions that in particular, published letters,

cannot be analysed outside a consideration of how the discourses of the cinema and of stardom are organized within the specific magazines. In addition, the generic conventions of letter-writing for publication would need to be taken into account. Particular types of letters, such as complaints, criticism, appreciation, humorous anecdotes, and so on, are recognizable forms for readers and editors, and knowledge of such forms will shape the kinds of letters written and selected for publication.<sup>285</sup>

Similar concerns could be raised about any of the writings I have employed in this chapter. Those who responded to Mayer and Mass Observation replied to calls that offered prizes for the most compelling response. Writers, then, responded in anticipation of what might win the approval of their judges. This was, to some extent, true for all of these writings, which audiences wrote with their readers' own opinions in mind.

Stacey goes on to argue that, while she ultimately chose not to use such sources in her own research, they should not be dismissed by historians because "... all audience researchers must deal inevitably with the question of representation not as a barrier to meaning, but rather as the form of that meaning."<sup>286</sup> In fact, I find these writings even more compelling because the mentalité of the moment shaped their form and discourses, and I have tried to highlight some of this context.

These writings suggest two things. First, they destabilize the very notion of the genre of empire films, suggesting it to be, at least in part, an academic creation. Whereas scholars have focused on India films as part of a collection of empire cinema and

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<sup>284</sup> The earliest of these writings was a letter published in *Picturegoer* on May 15, 1920, *Charge of the Light Brigade*, presumably produced by the British company Eric Williams Speaking Pictures in 1914. The last was a letter published in *Picturegoer* on July 3, 1948 about *Black Narcissus*.

<sup>285</sup> Stacey, 56.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*

imperial culture, audiences more often described them in conversation with a much larger genre of, to use Glancy's term, "British" films. Audience concerns around India films were part of larger concerns about Hollywood's treatment of British characters, concerns that were often tangential to representations of the empire.

The second issue that these writings make clear is that British audiences were acutely aware of the criticism levied against them and their empire in Hollywood's India films. If Hollywood believed that their India films toed the line between American anti-British-imperialism and British patriotism, writings from British audiences suggest otherwise. In fact, rather than bolstering British pride, the thinly-veiled jokes about and criticisms of British characters created self-conscious and defensive British audiences. The fact that American, not British, studios produced the bulk of India films screened in Britain in the late 1930s and early 1940s also undermined any sense of patriotism the film plots might have created. Instead writers grappled with a sense that Hollywood's India films signaled the inevitable slide towards American dominance on the world stage.

This is not, however, to say that India films were not popular with British audiences. But if this popularity did not necessarily easily correspond to a passion for the empire, how do we explain their success? It would be counterproductive to dismiss one sweeping generalization—that British audiences were enthusiastic for India films because they were enthusiastic for the empire—with another. Instead I will use writings from women cinemagoers to suggest one possible appeal for one subset of the British audience. Writings from women point to India films as an escape from the constraints of their domestic lives and as a welcome relief from the domestic melodramas marketed to female consumers.

### British is Best?

Contrary to accepted wisdom, only a very small portion of writers addressed India films, like Mayer's twenty-two-year-old clerk, as patriotic tributes to the British. For example, when a soldier stationed in India, who signed his letter simply 'TOM', pointed to some of the inaccuracies in *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, a few readers were quick to jump to Hollywood's defense. TOM was sure that the film would "make pots of money" but thought that it was "a wasted opportunity" to show the world what India was 'really' like.<sup>287</sup> He mocked the film's attempts at showing military strategy, pointing out that in the darkest moments of battle the film's soldiers "stood about in solid masses"—rather than dispersing to avoid making their groups large, easy targets—"and then moaned when the snipers picked them off."<sup>288</sup> He joked that Gary Cooper's character sat on "his horse like a statue with a machine-gun apparently firing at him from either side. I wonder what they were aiming at!"<sup>289</sup> According to him, "soldiers in the audience simply loved" when Cooper's character, "not content with lowering a Vickers gun *one* handed from a tower in the fort" then "held it under his arm and fired it with the other hand."<sup>290</sup> He laughed at "[t]he Commanding Officer, who exclaimed: 'Gentlemen!' on the slightest provocation."<sup>291</sup> In the end TOM hoped that Gaumont-British's planned production *Soldiers Three* would "show Hollywood how to make a real film of India."<sup>292</sup>

*Film Weekly* published several responses to TOM's letter, all of which endorsed Hollywood's attempts in the film. Barbara Fletcher of Blackpool called "TOM" petty-

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<sup>287</sup> "The Filmgoer Speaks," *Film Weekly* (10 May 1935), 14.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.* The Vickers gun was the successor to the Maxim gun and required a crew of at least a half a dozen to carry and operate.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*

mindful and compared him to “the man who could see nothing of Cromwell but his warts.”<sup>293</sup> Gordon Angel of Bournemouth asked, “Is it ‘British’ to sneer at a picture with a theme so noble as *Bengal Lancer*, and one presented by Americans as a tribute to British courage?”<sup>294</sup> Fletcher and Angel argued that *Bengal Lancer*, for all its flaws, was Hollywood’s pure-hearted homage to the British people. This exchange demonstrates the very opposing reactions to the American production of many India films. Whereas TOM, like Colonel Hanna, was quick to pounce on Hollywood’s mistakes, the others were quick to jump to Hollywood’s defense. Letters like Fletcher’s and Angel’s however, were the exception and not, as we might assume, the rule.

In fact many more writers echoed TOM’s concerns about the inaccuracies in Hollywood’s India films. P. N. Mills of Ipswich complained about the Hollywood happy ending foisted on Clive’s life story. It might “not have been quite ‘picture like’ for Robert Clive to kill himself” after his wife left him for her lover, which Mill believed to be the “real” history.<sup>295</sup> Still the film, according to Mill, should have stayed true to the “facts,” rather than “wash[ing] out” these tit-bits put into historical films.”<sup>296</sup> The blatant fictionalization of the Balaclava charge—a story that was both a well-known moment in British history and one that had been immortalized in Tennyson’s poem—in *The Charge of the Light Brigade* bothered readers. Miss E. J. Whittles of Yorkshire joked, “I always understood that *The Charge of the Light Brigade* [sic] was caused by a mistaken order.

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<sup>293</sup> “The Filmgoer Speaks,” *Film Weekly* (25 May 1935), 12.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>296</sup> “The Screen Parliament,” *Film Pictorial* (28 March 1936), 30.

But now Hollywood has taught me differently.”<sup>297</sup> Hollywood, it seemed to audiences, was willing to butcher British history if it meant making a profit.

But these conversations were not isolated to India films or even empire films. In fact, concerns about the inaccuracies in India films were part of larger discussions about Hollywood’s distortions of British national character in films. Hollywood’s Britain, as Glancy points out, was filled with mannered lords and ladies, dashing military men, and working-class cockneys for comic relief.<sup>298</sup> In 1935, one contemporary described Hollywood’s Britain as

an old-world country of Tudor mansions and tottering taxicabs, of dull-witted policemen and gruff old generals, of antique plumbing systems and timbered houses, out of which Mr Micawber might be expected to step at any moment.<sup>299</sup>

Picturegoer staff writer Max Breen joked that, to Hollywood, all Englishmen were like stately, commanding, gentlemanly C. Aubrey Smith.<sup>300</sup>

These concerns are most clear in writings about the heroes of India films. According to much textual analysis the imperial hero was the key factor in empire films’ patriotic popular appeal. He represented the audience on the screen, mirrored their own values. The heroes of India films were firm but fair leaders, dedicated to the public school code of dignity, honor, dedication, and self-sacrifice for the greater cause.<sup>301</sup> But British audiences could be very critical of these characters. They saw the heroes of India films not as characters to be emulated but as a pastiche, an amalgam of America’s skewed ideas about the British.

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<sup>297</sup> “The Screen Parliament,” *Film Pictorial* (17 December 1938), 22.

<sup>298</sup> Glancy, 3.

<sup>299</sup> “The Cinema: America’s ‘British’ Films,” *The Scotsman* (2 April 1935), 16.

<sup>300</sup> Max Breen, “England in Hollywood,” *The Picturegoer* (3 August 1935), 16.

<sup>301</sup> See, for example, Richards, *Visions*, op. cit.; Harper, op. cit.; Landy, op. cit.

While audiences may have identified with the heroes of India films to the extent that they were, as Richards puts it, “swept up into the drama, involved on the side of Right and pitted against Wrong,”<sup>302</sup> they did not identify with them as British ‘like them.’ America’s portrayal of British characters in India films raised objections about America’s distortions of British disposition. Walter Connor of Manchester complained of the portrayal of British officers in *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*. He claimed that the depiction of the film’s colonel, who went so far as to refuse to save his own son from capture by the ‘wicked Khan,’ had been “carried to excess.”<sup>303</sup> The exaggerated austerity of the Colonel made him appear stubborn and irrational, not the hero Connor believed real-life colonels to be. J. Trenchard of London mocked Republic Pictures’ *Storm Over Bengal* (1938) as “another example of Hollywood sentimentality about true blue Britishers doing their bit.”<sup>304</sup> The same Barbara Fletcher who defended *Bengal Lancer* against TOM’s attacks in 1935 complained in 1939, “Isn’t the *Bengal Lancers* formula wearing rather thin?”<sup>305</sup> She described America’s India films as “nothing but swaggering sham heroics designed to puff us up at the expense of our darker brethren.”<sup>306</sup>

So while scholars have assumed that British audiences must have swelled with pride at the portrayal of their people and history on the screen, in some ways they actually seem to have rejected what they saw as the exaggerated stereotype of the *pukka sahib*, the aloof, all-powerful white imperial leader. Writers seem to have been frustrated by this estrangement from their own national and imperial heroes. Rather than seeing the heroes of India films as the epitome of British spirit, audiences saw them as a mockery of

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<sup>302</sup> Richards, *Visions*, 3.

<sup>303</sup> “What Do You Think? Letters from Our Readers,” *The Picturegoer* (31 August 1935), 30.

<sup>304</sup> “What You Think,” *Film Weekly* (24 June 1939), 10.

<sup>305</sup> “What Do You Think? Letters from Our Readers,” *The Picturegoer* (8 July 1939), 33.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*



the British people and their imperial achievements. In fact the heroes of India films seemed as foreign to British audiences as Billy the Kid or Wild Bill Hickok. Only over-the-top imitations of Cambridge accents identified them as British at all.

Many of these complaints seem to have been directed at exaggerated depictions of the English elite predominant in India films. While India films often featured heroes from the public school tradition, British audiences most often came from the working and middle classes. Letters often suggested a sense of frustration that Hollywood focused on upper-class English characters and never represented ‘average’ British people. Duncan Hamilton of *Midlothian* asked,

How many times have you seen Hollywood’s idea of English life ruined by the incredible tongue-tied ‘nobility’ of the Errow and Hoxford hero. ... I admire the public school spirit and the [sic] deeper loyalties, but I must confess that when America goes full out on the ‘My pater, you chaps,’ ‘Only a cad would save himself’ system, the result is distinctly embarrassing. Selfless devotion to an idea is a truly magnificent thing, but its exaggerated interpretation by an insensitive film-maker makes it a pathetic mockery.”<sup>307</sup>

The editor of *Picturegoer* agreed. He added, “Yes. [The Americans] too often represent the type of people the late Rudyard Kipling designated as ‘jellied-bellied [sic] flag wavers.”<sup>308</sup> A writer from Bangor echoed Hamilton’s concern that American films focused on exaggerated imitations of the British upper class, distorting impressions of Britons in general. The letter, signed “Regular Filmgoer,” complained, “I get so tired of insipid youths who drift across the screen murmuring, “‘Fairplay’ and ‘Look here, I say, old boy!’ What must Americans think we are?”<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>307</sup> “What Do You Think? Letters from Our Readers,” *The Picturegoer* (8 April 1939), 31.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>309</sup> “The Filmgoer Speaks,” *Film Weekly* (27 August 1938), 8.

Writers were adamant that Hollywood's focus on a caricature of English elites was neither flattering nor favorable to the British people and expressed suspicion that India films made British characters the butt of thinly-veiled American sarcasm. Interestingly, these exaggerated depictions of privileged Englishmen and women seemed to many working- and middle-class writers a negative reflection on their own national identities, making *all* Britons seem foolish, hardheaded, and ridiculous, not noble or gallant. The film reviewer for *The Scotsman* noted

Always in those American-British films there is a suggestion that Britain is just a little backward... Is it entirely by chance, we wonder (though this may be going too far in suspicious supposition), that it is the Victorian novelists and themes of those times which are most in demand in Hollywood?<sup>310</sup>

British audiences sensed that Hollywood's depiction of their countrymen in India was a covert way of poking fun not just at the Raj but at the British people in general, portraying the entire nation as being trapped in some nineteenth-century time warp.

Hollywood's India films also served as a stark contrast to British studios' attempts at adventure films and raised questions about whether Britons would ever be able to compete with the enterprising Americans. These audience concerns mirrored those of British officials and those with concerns about what forces shaped British public opinion. Both worried at how quickly American films had overtaken the British marketplace. For example, in 1927 *The Daily Express* mused that "The bulk of our picture-goers are Americanised... We have several million people, mostly women, who, to all intents and purposes, are temporary American citizens."<sup>311</sup> In fact, officials attempted to stave off the influx of Hollywood imports in 1927 with the passage of the 1927 Cinematograph

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<sup>310</sup> "The Cinema: America's 'British' Films," *The Scotsman* (2 April 1935), 16.

<sup>311</sup> Quoted in David Reynolds, *Rich Relations: The American Occupation of Britain, 1942-1945* (London: Phoenix Press, 2000), 39.

Films Act. The act regulated the ratio of imported (in essence, American) films to British films screened in British cinemas. Parliament revised the act several times, and at its highest, the act required that thirty percent of all films shown in British cinemas be British productions.<sup>312</sup> According to Parliamentary records, in 1936 British distributors imported 1,060 American films; the next largest import market was Australia, with just 15 films.<sup>313</sup>

Audiences, too, expressed concerns about what the flood of American films might suggest about their own studios and their own country when compared to America. Rita MacGregor from Skemorlie attempted to put a positive spin on what she clearly saw as a deficiency in British film production. She blamed Britain's lack of powerful empire films on "[n]atural British reserve," a characteristic that she saw as "estimable" in "private life" but unacceptable when enacted by the British studio system writ large.<sup>314</sup> She asked,

Need we be so reticent about our great Empire, our historical achievements and even our life as it is lived in an ordinary British home? Couldn't we overlook this inherent modesty just once in a while and do something really big in the way of showing Britain to the world?<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>312</sup> Richards, *Dream Palace*, 42. Much of the work on British cinema in the 1930s has revolved around the efficacy (or lack thereof) and effects of the Cinematograph Films Act in reviving and shaping the British film industry. See for example, Low, *The History of British Films*; Jeffrey Richards, *Dream Palace*; Margaret Dickinson and Sarah Street, *Cinema and State: The Film Industry and the Government, 1927-1984* (London: BFI Publishers, 1985); Jeffrey Richards, ed., *The Unknown 1930s: An Alternative History of the British Cinema* (Manchester: I.B. Tauris, 2001). Particularly interesting is Jaikumar's recent and unique addition to this body of work. By the standards of the act, a British film was defined as one that was produced within the British Empire or Commonwealth, that was based on a story or screenplay written by a British subject, and that paid 75% of its salaries to British subjects. As such, Indian films qualified as "British" in terms of satisfying quota requirements. Officials in Britain and India both sought to encourage more Indian film imports to Britain, though these efforts were unsuccessful for reasons that Jaikumar outlines.

<sup>313</sup> "Imported Films," *Hansard's Official Reports of Parliamentary Debates* (14 July 1936).

<sup>314</sup> "The Screen Parliament," *Film Pictorial* (21 November 1936), 30.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*

Americans, she pointed out, had “already picked some of the plums of British stories and exploited them to the benefit of their own pocket.”<sup>316</sup> British filmmakers, she believed, could do the same if they would simply move past their inherent sense of humbleness.

There was a sense in many letters that Hollywood was stealing British history, distorting it, and then selling it back to British audiences at a significant profit. Anita Gailand of Weston-Super-Mare asked, “Why have American producers been allowed, in the past, the chance to make films which should have been made in England by English stars? Our producers should have been quicker and forestalled them.”<sup>317</sup> In producing *Charge of the Light Brigade*, she argued, “Hollywood stole a story that belongs to England.”<sup>318</sup> She admitted, however, “we must not complain when some enterprising American producer comes along and grabs a piece of our history, and turns out a film for the world to see” so long as British producers failed to “see what a wealth of film material lies in our history.”<sup>319</sup> No less than the great filmmaker Michael Balcon admitted that “when we English producers see pictures like [*Lives of a Bengal Lancer*] we return to our offices, bow our heads upon our desks and then summon our staffs for flagellation.”<sup>320</sup> Though he could not “harbor any resentment” at America’s productions because they were “so perfectly made,” they certainly did not foster a sense of British pre-eminence. Instead, they forced him to question his own abilities and those of his countrymen: “We ask why did we not think of that and why we did not do it first and why we cannot do it better.”<sup>321</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid.

<sup>317</sup> Mass Observation Archive (University of Sussex): TC Letters to *Picturegoer Weekly* 5/C.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid.

<sup>320</sup> “Mr Balcon in the U.S.,” *The Picturegoer* (23 March 1935), 34.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

The sense that Hollywood exploited British history for American profit could also manifest itself in a kind of back-handed gratitude and self-deprecation. British studios were, writers argued, either unwilling or unable to produce the kinds of quality films about the Empire that British audiences demanded. Vera G. Madams of Hitchin said as much in her letter to *Film Weekly*. She asked,

Why bother to make films in England? Why not just write the books and plays, let Hollywood pay heavily for the film rights, and then sit back and wait for the finished pictures, which, incidentally, are bound to be much better than anything we could have made? It has taken us two hundred years to conquer India. It took Hollywood two films, *Clive of India* and *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, to show us how we did it.<sup>322</sup>

In a letter titled by *Picturegoer*, “Hollywood’s ‘British’ Pictures: Why does America do these things better?”, H. Berne wondered,

It is passing strange that Hollywood should constantly have to show us how to make films with purely British themes, films which by birthright we should be making. How truly British, in everything but manufacture was *Calvacade*? Now they give us a perfect production in *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*. Hollywood certainly seems to have the knack of making better British pictures than we can, and I’ve no doubt that *Clive of India* will be another example.<sup>323</sup>

After seeing *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* for the second time, Sadie Lewis of Dalston asked herself, “How is it that America can produce such an all-British atmosphere and such typically fine British soldiers and manly Britons when, in our own films, we give to the world such poor examples of British manhood and intellect?”<sup>324</sup>

Hollywood’s India films seemed to prove British filmmakers’ inability to produce worthwhile films. Writers railed against the fact that their own studios were unable to capitalize on British stories or British film tastes. Mrs. W. Barnard of Kenton wrote,

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<sup>322</sup> “The Filmgoer Speaks,” *Film Weekly* (9 November 1935), 14.

<sup>323</sup> “What Do You Think? Letters from Our Readers.” *The Picturegoer* (23 March 23 1935), 34.

<sup>324</sup> “The Screen Parliament,” *Film Pictorial* (23 March 1935), 30.

An object lesson in realistic film production which our own British film companies might take well to hear is *The Lives of a Bengal Lancer*. ...

When we in England can produce such a picture as *Bengal Lancer* then we will really be challenging Hollywood.<sup>325</sup>

Roma Lanson of Sussex railed, “*Wake up, Britain! Give your ‘fans’ something of their own to look at on the screen, without their having to rely upon Hollywood to supply American history, or every now and again to offer Hollywoodian Clives and Richard Lion Hearts.*”<sup>326</sup> Miss A. Scarborough of Hartlepool complained that British studios often rehashed the same stories while wonderful material went to waste, or worse, to the American studios. She blamed laziness in the British studios, arguing,

American studios are constantly proving that there IS [plenty of original story material]...providing that you take the trouble to go out and look for it.<sup>327</sup>

She was grateful that Hollywood had “taken the trouble” to film stories like *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*.<sup>328</sup> Otherwise, she believed, “we should probably never have seen them filmed.”<sup>329</sup> At best, the British film industry seemed blind to what British audiences wanted to see and, at worst, purposely denied audiences the kinds of films they demanded.

Writings from British film audiences, then, demonstrate that India films did not necessarily reflect British preoccupations with the empire. In fact, they highlight increasing British concerns about their nation’s position on the world stage in light of America’s increasing power. And they show that there is no easy correlations between India films’ popularity and their apparently jingoistic storylines. Yet in spite of these

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<sup>325</sup> “The Screen Parliament,” *Film Pictorial* (1 June 1935), 30.

<sup>326</sup> Emphasis in original. “The Screen Parliament,” *Film Pictorial* (8 February 1936) 30.

<sup>327</sup> “The Screen Parliament,” *Film Pictorial* (13 November 1938), 26.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid.

complaints, it is impossible to deny that India films were incredibly successful in the British market. If it was not because they played on British patriotism, what made them so popular? Distilling the plethora of audience responses into one concise answer seems counterproductive. Instead I will suggest one possible appeal for one possible subset of audience members based on their writings.

### **The Adventure of Empire**

While reading through the reports of the 1937 Bernstein Survey, a study funded by British movie theater mogul Sidney Bernstein to track British cinema tastes, I noticed that Henry Hathaway's ranking as the eleventh most popular director was qualified by a note. It explained that Hathaway received two female votes for every one male vote.<sup>330</sup> At the time Hathaway's biggest box office success was 1935's *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*. As I continued my research in letters-to-the-editor of British film magazines, I found that of 300 letters, a third came just from women identifying an India film as their favorite of the year, as one of the greatest films ever produced, or as a film worth emulating in the future.

In many ways much of the scholarship on British imperial culture has assumed that the adventure of empire was reserved for men and that the audience for imperial adventure stories, whether written or visual, was overwhelmingly male. Literary scholar Graham Dawson has suggested that "With the occasional, troublesome exception of a Queen Bess, a Florence Nightingale or a Margaret Thatcher, the national epic has been predominantly a man's story, and masculine prowess the dominant expression of national

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<sup>330</sup> Sidney L. Bernstein, *The Bernstein Questionnaire, 1937*. (London: British Film Institute), 22.

character.”<sup>331</sup> Prominent literary scholar Martin Green likewise argues that empire was “a place where adventure took place, and men became heroes.”<sup>332</sup> The empire offered younger sons an opportunity to earn their fortune and a venue where social outcasts could prove their worth. Dawson goes so far as to argue that “adventure in the expanding Victorian Empire provided opportunities for a veritable ‘flight from domesticity’ on the part of British manhood.”<sup>333</sup> The fictional empire was a space for male adventure, a place where women were few.

Despite increasing attention to the subtle intersections of race, gender, and class in the scholarship of the last fifteen years, much of the work on empire cinema assumes that the genre told men’s stories to primarily male audiences. Perhaps the most noted scholars on empire cinema, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, for example, argue,

While girls were domesticated as homemakers, without what Virginia Woolf called a “room of their own,” boys could play, if only in their imaginations, in the space of empire. The fantasy of far away regions offered “charismatic realms of adventure” free from charged heterosexual engagements. Adventure films, and the “adventure” of going to the cinema, provided a vicarious experience of passionate fraternity, a playing field for the self-realization of European masculinity. Just as colonized space was available to empire, and colonial landscapes were available to imperial cinema, so was the psychic space available for the play of the virile spectatorial imagination as a kind of *Lebensraum*.<sup>334</sup>

Shohat and Stam seem to assume that these strictly defined gender delineations hold true whether one is talking about the actual empire or the empire on movie screens. Wendy Webster argues that “Popular imagery of empire between the wars nevertheless remained

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<sup>331</sup> Graham Dawson, *Solider Heroes: British Adventure, Empire, and the Imagining of Masculinities* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 13.

<sup>332</sup> Martin Green, *Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 63.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>334</sup> Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 101.



overwhelmingly masculine.”<sup>335</sup> That women seem to have been so attracted to this particular genre, then, is somewhat surprising. And yet British women’s apparent interest in India films clearly demonstrates that we must rethink such assumptions about cinema audiences.

One of the few scholars who has considered the possibility of a female audience for colonial adventure films, film historian Brian Taves, suggests that women possessed the same escapist motives as their male counterparts:

Adventures served as a safety valve, permitting men, and women, to escape confining social stratification and preemptive class positioning and the resultant economic fate. By adventuring, one could leap over social and economic barriers and be judged by qualities such as valor and courage, rather than by ancestors and family. Adventurers found a new, more egalitarian society (at least for whites) in dangerous lands far removed from the influence of home.<sup>336</sup>

The Empire, he argues, offered a realm for white men to escape from the pressures and monotony of the domestic life for which they were destined. By identifying with the colonial adventurer, in empire films white men and women ‘trapped’ by circumstances in the metropole could live vicariously in a place where traditional class distinctions apparently did not hold.

Taves goes on to argue that for the protagonists of empire films, “Traditional pleasures, including family and the comforts of civilization are willingly and even eagerly forfeited to indulge this existence.”<sup>337</sup> Writings from women viewers seem to bear out this argument. The cinematic empire was not only a place where Britons were judged by the content of their character rather than their family’s social status, it was a

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<sup>335</sup> Webster, 10.

<sup>336</sup> Brian Taves, *The Romance of Adventure: The Genre of Historical Adventure Movies* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), 179.

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

place in which the confines of the domestic sphere could be eschewed, an idea that held special appeal for British women audiences.

In fact women would have been, in all likelihood, the primary audience for India films. In the 1930s and 1940s Britain cinemagoing was a habit, a monthly, weekly, even twice-weekly ritual in which women were zealous participants. The Wartime Social Survey found in 1943 that, 34 percent of women went to the cinema at least once a week.<sup>338</sup> Of those classified as ‘cinema enthusiasts’—defined as those who saw films at least once a week—69 percent were women. Of all women surveyed, 71 percent went to the cinema at least occasionally. While men’s cinema attendance tended to decrease as they aged thanks to participation in political organizations, trade unions, and the pub and the club, middle- and working-class women’s attendance tended to remain consistent throughout their lives. All of this meant that in the 1930s and early 1940s British female cinemagoers would have had regular exposure to India films in their local picture palace.

The lives of interwar working- and lower-middle class British women, exactly the women who made up so much of the cinemagoing public, were in many ways defined by their relationships to their homes and families. Economic, political and demographic changes contributed to the twentieth-century decline in married women’s work and their increasing focus in the domestic sphere.<sup>339</sup> Even when married women worked outside

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<sup>338</sup> Jacob P. Mayer, *British Cinemas and their Audiences: Sociological Studies* (London: Dennis Dobson Ltd., 1948), 254.

<sup>339</sup> For an analysis of the changes in women’s responsibilities, see, for example, Judy Giles, *The Parlour and the Suburb: Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity, and Modernity* (Oxford: Berg, 2004); Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures in England, 1918-1951* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Susan Grayzell, *Women’s Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France During the First World War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Judy Giles, *Women, Identity, and Private Life in Britain, 1900-1950* (New York: Macmillan, 1995); Elizabeth Roberts, *Women and Families: An Oral History, 1940-1970* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995); Margaret Randolph Higonnet et. al, eds, *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven, CT: Yale

the home, they often found themselves constrained by the “double burden” of household duties and wage labor.

The decline in family size in the early twentieth century did nothing to reduce the amount of work married women invested in their homes and families. As married women’s wage-earning activities decreased, their domestic responsibilities increased. In the same moment that family size decreased, the time women were expected to invest in their families increased. Fewer children meant that women faced amplified pressure to keep those children alive and well. Contemporaries imagined that women’s work in the two World Wars would dramatically change women’s roles, but while the wars “did bring short term changes in women’s specific tasks,” they did not bring about the “fundamental changes in the situation of women that had been anticipated.”<sup>340</sup> Culturally women were increasingly defined as mothers and homemakers and their roles as workers were subordinated to their husbands’.

While many women may have felt a sense of fulfillment and even autonomy in their roles as wives and mothers, cinema houses likely appealed to women in particular because they offered a psychological and physical escape from the domestic routines and spaces with which their lives were enmeshed. What adventuring in the cinema accomplished was to allow women to briefly escape the monotony of their daily schedules. Escapism tends to be a slippery term which, as film scholar Jackie Stacey points out, is “often meant pejoratively” as a means of dismissing whole genres as

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University Press, 1987); Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman’s Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women, 1890-1940* (New York: B. Blackwell, 1984).

<sup>340</sup> Margaret R. and Patrice L.-R. Higonnet, “The Double Helix,” in Margaret Randolph Higonnet et. al, eds, *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 33.

“insignificant and unworthy of critical or academic attention.”<sup>341</sup> More constructive is to conceive of escapism as something historically specific, grounded in distinct social and cultural circumstances. Stacey argues that it is important to understand both what “pleasurable feelings the audience escapes *into*” as well as “to analyse what it is they are escaping *from*.”<sup>342</sup>

If women desired to escape *into* the world of India films—one in which “traditional pleasures, including the family” could be rejected—it may have been because many of these women were attempting to escape *from* a world in which they could not easily eschew these “pleasures.” A thirty-year-old housewife and mother of two wrote to Mayer in 1945, “I definitely go to the cinema to be taken out of myself and to forget the cares of housework, rationing and washing baby’s nappies!”<sup>343</sup> A 22-year-old weaver explained, “Once outside the cinema... I know exactly what to expect the next day and the day after and so on, so that we often feel a little discontented with our way of living.”<sup>344</sup> A 43-year-old housewife explained that cinemagoing was a suitable substitute for the kind of adventures on which she could never embark, writing, “I like travel, but I find that the excellent travel pictures we get satisfy that longing.”<sup>345</sup>

By the 1930s, movie houses, often referred to as “dream palaces” both because of the fantasies displayed on their screens and their lavish interior decorations, became centers of community life, rivaling churches and pubs.<sup>346</sup> While earlier films had been screened in buildings akin to (and sometimes actually) warehouses and converted shops,

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<sup>341</sup> Stacey, 90. While Stacey is writing about “women’s films,” I think this assessment is equally apt for the apparently jingoistic India film.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid, 101.

<sup>343</sup> Quoted in Mayer, *British Cinemas*, 31.

<sup>344</sup> Quoted in Mayer, *British Cinemas*, 67.

<sup>345</sup> Quoted in Mayer, *British Cinemas*, 62.

<sup>346</sup> Richards, *Dream Palace*, 18.

by the 1920s the older venues were “superseded by ever larger, more imposing and more lavishly decorated structures, designed in a wide variety of styles.”<sup>347</sup> Stacey has argued that films were only one aspect of the escapist effect of cinemagoing and that “the otherworldliness” of the cinema house itself was a key component, especially for women.<sup>348</sup> Movie houses transformed from venues for screening movies to spaces that became appealing and interesting in and of themselves. She argues that because women were

Responsible for the domestic space at home, and thus acutely aware of its limitations, women could thus be relied upon to respond to the promise of luxury offered by many cinemas. The fact that women were typically responsible for the domestic organization of households at the time meant that their desire for escape from such hardships may have been especially intense.<sup>349</sup>

The fact that women were often known to attend films in the middle of the afternoon as a break from shopping, errands, and housework points to the immediate appeal of the physical cinema itself. The picture palace offered a unique arena in which women could adventure without her husband or children and without risking accusations of impropriety.

In fact, women cinema patrons describe the experience in terms of fulfilling a sense of adventure. A 21-year-old chemist’s assistant lamented the fact that in her own life she would never have the chance for adventure afforded to her male counterparts. She wrote, “My biggest regret is that I wasn’t a man, otherwise I’d have gone to sea.”<sup>350</sup> Since this outlet for adventure was, she believed, was unavailable to her, she relied on films to give her the same exhilaration. She explained, “I think most films have

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<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*, 19

<sup>348</sup> Stacey, *Stargazing*, 95-6

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>350</sup> Quoted in Mayer, *British Cinemas*, 81.

wonderful scenery and I imagine climbing hills and mountains and sailing on lakes until someone beside me says: ‘All that is made of cardboard and paper.’”<sup>351</sup> If she were a man, she could really experience the adventure of travel, but being a woman, she was aware that the cinema was all she had at her disposal.

The adventure of cinemagoing was one steeped in an extravagant imperial Orientalist tradition. Dream palaces were designed to highlight luxury and to give a sense of exciting adventure. Their names—like the Alhambra, the Trocadero, the Palace, and the Majestic—were “replete with the promise of exotic locales, full-blooded romance, Imperial splendor and unimaginable luxuries.”<sup>352</sup> Cinema architects channeled the architectural motifs of the period, designing picture-houses that embodied the classic stereotypes of the four-corners of the globe: “Chinese pagodas..., Egyptian temples..., Jacobean manor-houses..., Assyrian ziggurats..., Italian palazzi... and Spanish haciendas.”<sup>353</sup> As Richards points out, these were “fit settings in which to watch Garbo romancing, Doug Fairbanks swashbuckling or Valentino sheiking.”<sup>354</sup> But if Garbo, Fairbanks, and Valentino had their adventures on the screen, female patrons embarked on an adventure by entering into the cinema itself. If a working- or middle-class British women would never see China, Egypt, or India, for less than a quid she could imagine herself to be a cosmopolitan adventurer by visiting her local Mecca, Curzon, or Empire—

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<sup>351</sup> Ibid.

<sup>352</sup> Richards, *Dream Palace*, 18.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid. Of course British women were as likely as not to have regular access to a dramatically designed dream palace. While lavish cinemas became the trend in cinema construction, in many districts they were uneconomical or untenable, especially if the local theater was privately owned and not part of a chain willing to invest in overhauling local cinemas. Dream palaces tended to be an urban phenomenon and even then tended to be built in middle-class neighborhoods where higher-priced ticket sales justified the investment. Suburban theaters were generally more modestly designed. In rural areas and working-class neighborhoods the local theater was likely to be a “flea pit” with long wooden benches (or moveable seats) and a policy of bringing one’s own refreshments from home.

each with its own imperial connotations—all on her own, with no need for a male chaperone or for toting her children behind her.

The arrival of an India film in a weekly programme, however, often meant that cinema managers covered their lobbies in elaborate decorations used to promote the film. While these displays were available for a variety of films, India films seemed to demand particularly ornate presentations. For example, when the King's Cinema in Dundee screened the India nature adventure, *Bring 'Em Back Alive*, “the manager...set up a jungle scene in his foyer, complete with tropical foliage, trees and animals. The doorman was kitted out in drill suit and pith-helmet, and the usherettes were also put into tropical garb.”<sup>355</sup> The goal was to make the act of cinemagoing an event and experience in itself. When patrons stepped off the streets of Dundee and into the King's Cinema, they were meant to feel as if they had traveled to India, or at least the cinema manager's white middle-class version of the Indian jungle.

In pressbooks distributed to cinema exhibitors, studios made suggestions for intricate decoration schemes and even offered ornate supplies for sale. When London Films released *The Drum*, they advertised “LITHOGRAPHED TURBANS” to be distributed “for kids to wear,” “PAPER DAGGERS,” and “REAL SABRES,” which they suggested could be used by ushers, “as wall decorations for interior of your lobby or theatre,” or suspended “from marquee to decorate your front.”<sup>356</sup> More elaborate still, they offered an animated marquee display. It featured an oversized image of Sabu to which cinema managers could

mount a real drum...and fasten a pair of real drumsticks to the hands. By hinging the arms of the figure at the elbow and giving it animation with a belt

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<sup>355</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>356</sup> London Films, *The Drum* medium pressbook (1935), British Film Institute.

arrangement attached to a motor, you can make the figure automatically beat the drum in steady rhythm.<sup>357</sup>

For managers who preferred to express their own creativity, the studio still presented a plethora of suggestions. A display of drums, “preferably with a story attached to them” could be set up in the lobby. They could exhibit several mass-produced copies of dresses worn by Valerie Hobson that would also be made available for sale at local dress shops. They could display various turbans, a women’s fashion trend and, coincidentally, “worn in the picture by Indian Chieftains.”<sup>358</sup> And for the truly ambitious, London Films suggested managers organize “a fife-and-drum corps parade” or, to promote the fact that movie had been filmed in Technicolor, “set off... fireworks from the top of your marquee.”<sup>359</sup>

When The Archers released *Black Narcissus* in 1947, they suggested that managers dress a man like “the holy man [of the film] who sits cross-legged all day long and is never seen to speak or eat.”<sup>360</sup> Patrons should be encouraged to try and interact with him “and offer a prize to anyone who can make him speak or laugh.”<sup>361</sup> Or he could “have some passes on hand and when he has a large crowd he can say ‘I have wisdom. I have seen ‘Black Narcissus’ and hand some to onlookers. Or he can have a sign to this effect, if you don’t want to spoil the illusion by his talking”<sup>362</sup> The illusion, of course, was that average British picturegoers had traveled to India and happened on this silent Indian holy man.

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<sup>357</sup> Ibid.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid.

<sup>360</sup> The Archers, *Black Narcissus* large pressbook (1948), British Film Institute.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid.



If the dream palace offered a very real physical escape and sense of Eastern adventure to female patrons, India films became part of a discursive attempt on the part of female cinemagoers to argue for their own sense of adventure and to argue against the imagined inevitability of their lives as wives and mothers and the domesticated definitions of femininity that seemed to accompany these roles.

Knowing (or at least believing) that women comprised the majority of cinema audiences, studios expended considerable time and money to find films that would attract and entertain their primary demographic.<sup>363</sup> India films sought to cater to female audiences through incongruous romantic subplots and female characters with whom women were supposed to identify. As I will show, women's reactions to these attempts seem to prove that studios failed to recognize that India films' appeal to women would actually lay in their undomesticated adventuring, not in any attempts to inject femininity or romance.

One of the most remarkable oddities of India films is the often awkward inclusion of female love interests into what were otherwise homosocial storylines. The vast majority of these films focus on small groups of Anglo men, usually soldiers, living on the edges of Anglo-Indian society. But many of them included what can only be described as a 'token' female character who provided a love interest for one or more of the male leads.

That studios saw these female characters and love stories as a potential boon to their ticket sales is apparent from publicity posters. The posters for many India films featured images of their female characters, even when these characters appeared in films only briefly. Some advertisements depicted women as objects of romance and male lust.

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<sup>363</sup> Ibid., 85

Posters for *Storm Over Bengal* show Patric Knowles cradling Rochelle Hudson. Advertisements for *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* display an alluring Kathleen Burke caressing Gary Cooper's cheek, even though their characters never even meet in the film.<sup>364</sup> A poster for *Gunga Din* included a picture of Douglas Fairbanks, Jr tenderly kissing Joan Fontaine. Beneath the picture, a caption proclaimed, "She gambled her all against the army and the valiant Sergeants Three—and never knew whether she had won or lost!...Romance aflame through dangerous days and nights of terror...in a land where anything can happen—most of all to a beautiful girl alone!"<sup>365</sup> In fact, as I discussed in my last chapter, it was the men of the film who found themselves in danger, not Fontaine's character. A poster for *King of the Khyber Rifles* featured only a tight shot of Victor McLaglen poised over a seductively recumbent Myrna Loy, without a single reference to a storyline that primarily focused on a British army captain on a mission to rescue imprisoned British soldiers in India.<sup>366</sup>

Other advertisements promoted their female characters as relatively powerful figures even though the same characters generally proved insignificant in the actual film. Posters for *Clive of India* show Ronald Colman embracing Loretta Young or Young hovering behind Colman, watching him adoringly. Captions credited Lady Clive for her husband's successes. One declared "SIX WORDS FROM A WOMAN...CHANGED A NATION'S DESTINY!"<sup>367</sup> Another proclaimed, "At her nod bugles blew...drums roared...He was right...with the woman he loved at his side he became a Man of

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<sup>364</sup> Paramount Pictures, *The Lives of a Bengal Lancer* medium pressbook (1935), British Film Institute.

<sup>365</sup> Ellipsis in original, RKO Radio Pictures, *Gunga Din* medium pressbook (1939), British Film Institute.

<sup>366</sup> Fox Film Corporation, *King of the Khyber Rifles* medium pressbook (1929), British Film Institute.

<sup>367</sup> Ellipsis in original, United Artists, *Clive of India* medium pressbook (1935), British Film Institute.

Destiny!”<sup>368</sup> Posters for *The Charge of the Light Brigade* show Errol Flynn gazing passionately into the eyes of Olivia de Havilland. Some advertisements for the film paraphrased Tennyson’s poem, announcing, “‘THEIR’S [sic] NOT TO REASON WHY...THEIR’S [sic] BUT TO DO AND DIE’ TO AVENGE A REGIMENT’S HONOUR AND PROTECT A WOMAN’S NAME!”<sup>369</sup> India here is a place that women may inhabit but in which they are simply objects of patriarchal protection, not pioneers.

Ironically, if the studios’ intention was to pander to female audiences by including female characters, they likely missed their mark. In letters to film fan magazines, women expressed disgust with trite love stories in India films, even when marginal to the plot, and the intrusion of female characters at all. S. E. Richardson, likely a female writer, explained,

Women do not want nothing but man-and-girl love stories by way of their screen entertainment. A simple, straight-forward love story *is* definitely attractive to a woman, but the usual idea that there *must* be a woman in the story for the man to fall in love with, to provide interest for the ladies, is quite frankly unfounded.”<sup>370</sup>

Better, according to Richardson, to leave all-male stories alone. Women would be equally entertained without contrived romances. Mrs. W. Barnard of Middlesex lauded *Bengal Lancer*’s production in Hollywood for eschewing the need for a romantic subplot and asked, “Could a British film company have resisted sex appeal in the picture?”<sup>371</sup> Creating a story that did not fall back on romantic sop was, according to Barnard, to

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<sup>368</sup> Ibid.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid.

<sup>370</sup> “The Screen Parliament,” *Film Pictorial* (29 June 1935), 28.

<sup>371</sup> “The Screen Parliament,” *Film Pictorial* (1 June 1935), 30.

America's credit. A love story and female characters would have diminished the film's appeal.<sup>372</sup>

Few women wrote about specific female characters in India films. When they did, their letters tended to focus on the actresses rather than the characters themselves. Even so, these letters were often incredibly harsh. Several women wrote about, in the words of one writer, the "bewildering and flamboyant wardrobe worn by Loretta Young in *Four Men and a Prayer*."<sup>373</sup> Particularly offensive was one of her hats, "which looked exactly like a pumpkin."<sup>374</sup> In a similar vein, Miss Edna Marie Ware complained, "Jean Simmons herself must know that her weakest feature is her legs: why then did she let the Archers put a ribbon round her ankle and draw attention to them in *Black Narcissus*?"<sup>375</sup> The most lasting impressions of these roles were pumpkin-shaped hats and thick legs.

Even fewer letters address scenes featuring Indian women. Those that did were no more positive. Sarah Thompson of Fife, Scotland asked, "Why can't we see more pictures that are performed by men only[?] The best two pictures I have ever seen were *Mutiny on the Bounty* and *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, and I thought the former was spoiled by the presence of native girls."<sup>376</sup> While these "native girls" appear in *Bengal Lancer* for less than a minute, Thompson's impression of the movie is based in her frustration at their being included at all.

Of course, it seems no surprise that woman viewers rejected India films' female characters. As several scholars have noted, women's roles in India films were as part of a

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<sup>372</sup> In reality, *Bengal Lancer* did include a "sexy" subplot, though Burke's character is only on the screen for a few minutes. The climax of the story comes as two soldiers are captured trying to rescue a friend who has fallen into a trap laid by a beautiful Russian (Burke) working for the wicked Mohammed Khan.

<sup>373</sup> "The Filmgoer Speaks," *Film Weekly* (10 June 1939), 28.

<sup>374</sup> "The Filmgoer Speaks," *Film Weekly* (27 August 1938), 24-5.

<sup>375</sup> "What Do You Think? Letters from Our Readers," *The Picturegoer* (3 July 1948), 14.

<sup>376</sup> "What Do You Think? Letters from Our Readers," *The Picturegoer* (17 August 1937), 30.

domesticated and domesticating background. Richards explains, “The woman’s place in Imperial films was incontestably in the home, unless she was Queen Victoria, in which case it was on the throne.”<sup>377</sup> The only functions of female characters were to create love interests for the male lead and, in some cases, to act as catalysts that bring about the story’s climax. I have already mentioned the role played by Tania (Katherine Burke) in *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*. In *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, Major Geoffrey Vickers (Errol Flynn) is driven into the suicidal charge by unrequited love for Else Campbell (Olivia de Havilland), who is in love with Vickers’s brother Perry (Patric Knowles). Similarly, in *Storm Over Bengal*, Lt. Neil Allison (Richard Cromwell) sacrifices his own life to save the life of the women he loves, his brothers’ wife (Rochelle Hudson). In *Gunga Din*, Ballantine must decide between marriage (and a quiet job with her father’s tea company) and his life of adventure and antics in the army.

The female character is a source of domestication for the male adventurer. Several India films end in a marriage or a proposal, a supposedly “happy” ending. As Taves points out, these unions tend to be bittersweet. He explains, “Marriage implies a sublimation of the adventurous instinct, the hero joining the new establishment as the narrative’s conclusion indicates that the need for adventure is now over.”<sup>378</sup> Woman, then, is the ultimate killjoy. No wonder so many women seemed to be dissatisfied with these characters.

In fact, what seems to have appealed to women about India films was exactly the extent to which they were free from women and heterosexual entanglements. Female characters in India films only served to remind them of their assumed roles as “domestic

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<sup>377</sup> Jeffrey Richards, *Visions*, 93.

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

angels,” exactly the opposite goal many women claimed to have had in watching these films. Writings from female viewers employ India films to dispel the myth of women as naturally lovesick fools and wearing the blinders of domesticity. They were not, they argued, anything like the female characters in India films.

Instead women writers used their inclination for India films to argue against the idea of women as totally satisfied by their domestic responsibilities, and they employed India films to explore the potential for escape from their domestic drudgery. By finding pleasure in (relatively) woman-free films and announcing this pleasure, female audiences pushed back against assumptions that their only joys came from home, marriage, and family. What female responses to India films demonstrate are the ways in which women, who “should” have been interested in the drama of the domestic and heterosexual love, used men’s adventure stories to explore the concept of femininity and female desires. Women’s writings suggest that they purposely rejected identification with female characters and instead identified with the gung-ho imperial adventure.

One writer to *Film Weekly* found herself under attack after she suggested that gender determined film tastes. She claimed that that while every woman she knew loved *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (a film about the historical love affair between poets Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning), most men could not stand it. She argued,

Exactly the contrary is the case with the *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, with its theme of heroism and devotion to duty. All the men I know thought it splendid, while the girls—well many of them could not sit through it. ... Despite shorts, cynicism and Eton crops, Man is still the adventurer; Woman still the romantic. And their films prove it.<sup>379</sup>

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<sup>379</sup> “The Filmgoer Speaks,” *Film Weekly* (13 September 1935), 14.

Two weeks later, *Film Weekly* published several rebuttals. Their responses suggest just what was at stake in women's adamant claims to adventure film fandom. Miss I. D. Fowler of Bristol seethed, "This popular fallacy must be exploded, or I personally shall explode!"<sup>380</sup> She railed against the idea that women could only relate to overly dramatized, melodramatic family romances. She called these films "tommy-rot" and went on to complain that men were "credited with appreciating and making a box-office success of splendid films like *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*[".]” She concluded, "The lovesick young idiot (female, of course) who went to the pictures to gape at her screen hero is a creature of the past. She always was a bit of a myth anyway."<sup>381</sup> Women's tastes, according to Fowler, were just as discerning as men's, as witnessed by their enthusiasm for films like *Bengal Lancer*, and they were equally capable of looking beyond emotional sop to production values and recognizing quality pictures. Women were not simply emotionally-driven creatures but as analytical as their male counterparts.

Even letters that agreed with the stereotype that women could not appreciate adventure films argued that they, the women writing the letters, were different from the rest of their sex. Miss A. Murdoch of Dundee blamed "the romanticism of the majority of women" for cinemas playing "so much rubbish and why so many good films are spoiled by having a 'nice' love theme dragged in by the heels."<sup>382</sup> She lamented,

It is a pity that these women have not the intelligence to realise that the comradeship between men, admirably shown in *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, is a far nobler thing than the sloppiness, known as True Love, between a man and a woman.<sup>383</sup>

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<sup>380</sup> "The Filmgoer Speaks," *Film Weekly* (27 September 1935), 12.

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>382</sup> "The Filmgoer Speaks," *Film Weekly* (4 October 1935), 14.

<sup>383</sup> *Ibid.*

She, on the other hand, had seen *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* and was “quite ready to go again.” If other women were saps, she had the wherewithal to see beyond romantic sentimentality. By contrasting herself with the ‘typical’ pining woman, Murdoch, by identifying herself with men’s tastes, suggested that she was more sensible, discriminating, and intelligent than the majority of her sex.

Other respondents argued that women were actually stifled adventurers who looked to films to satisfy their desire for bold escapades. S. E. Richardson of South Woodford wrote, “Very many women have a strong spirit of adventure which they look to the screen to satisfy. All my own women friends were enthralled by *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* and were fully appreciative of such supposedly “masculine” films as *Man of Aran*, *Fifty Fathoms Deep*, *Treasure Island* and *King of the Khyber Rifles*.”<sup>384</sup> Whereas men might seek adventure via any number of avenues, women, who were just as eager for daring exploits, had to turn to films to satisfy their very real desires.

“Eastern” locales proved especially appealing as a landscape for such escape. An 18-year-old government employee found that the East seemed to be the exact opposite of the world I which she lived: colorful, romantic, and full of adventurous exploits. She wrote that after seeing a film based on *Arabian Nights*, she found that “Films of action and adventure in the East were now to my taste, because I thought Oriental life was so romantic. . . . The cold, grey climate of the British Isles compare unfavorably with the beautiful sunshine and colour shown on the screen.”<sup>385</sup> She compared the “realities” of

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<sup>384</sup> “The Filmgoer Speaks,” *Film Weekly* (27 September 1935), 12.

<sup>385</sup> Quoted in Mayer, *British Cinemas*, 107. Because Mayer had requested a full movie-going autobiography, it is not totally clear what film she might have been referencing here, though based on the timing and her reference to the use of color, it seems likely that she meant *Thief of Bagdad*.



her own life, to which she saw no alternative, with the world to which she was able to journey in the cinema.

Nina Williams of Glasgow described her experience of an India film as a vicarious journey on which she could travel without forsaking her various responsibilities. She wrote to *Picturegoer*,

It was one of those days where one wishes oneself at the other end of the earth; I walked into a kinema and practically got there, for I had entered during a showing of a tour through India.

I saw its strange people and customs and saw places I had before only read about.

...I came out feeling as if I had been on holiday, refreshed in mind and feeling happy again...<sup>386</sup>

*Picturegoer* labeled her letter “A Cheap Holiday,” though it is clear from her letter that her filmic journey to India would have been an impossible holiday in real life.

Many women’s letters identify India films as particularly worthy of praise by overtly contrasting them with the kinds of romantic melodrama that were supposed to appeal to female audiences. Women writers used India films to argue against the idea that women could not appreciate men’s adventure films and that their only interests lay in soppy domestic romances. What women writers mention frequently is gratitude for the kind of adventure these films offered as opposed to the tiresome household dramas offered in ‘women’s’ genres. For example, Miss B. Rodway of London complained that

Producers seem determined to work from the angle that *all* modern women are not just interested in, but positively absorbed and carried away by such exhibitions as eccentric clothes, artificial make-up, marriage and divorce, night clubs, mannequin parades, precious children...and thus we are regularly provided with various plot and casting formulas.<sup>387</sup>

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<sup>386</sup> “What Do You Think? Letters from Our Readers,” *The Picturgoer* (29 August 1936), 28.

<sup>387</sup> “What Do You Think? Letters from Our Readers,” *The Picturegoer* (10 December 1938), 26.

She called films like *Manproof* and *Second Honeymoon*, classic examples of the domestic melodrama, “dreary marital films.”<sup>388</sup> She claimed that the only time she could be assured that film would not “be distorted into a woman’s field day is when the name of Gary Cooper, Errol Flynn” or a bevy of other masculine film stars received top billing.<sup>389</sup> ‘Women’s films’ like these often revolved around a female protagonists who, willingly or not, tend to forsake earlier lives of careering, sexual exploration, and independence to settle into lives of domestic ‘bliss.’<sup>390</sup>

While India films focus on the male adventurer as protagonist, in some ways, their heroes grapple with the same conflict between public and private spheres as the protagonists of the ‘women’s film.’ Often, as Taves points out, the hero of the imperial adventure film has chosen his life of colonial service as a means of escaping the domestic life into which he is expected to settle.<sup>391</sup> Unlike the protagonist of the women’s film, however, the hero of the India film is allowed the space to choose between traditional family life and a life of self-important adventuring, a privilege afforded neither to most British women nor to their representatives in the women’s film. By arguing against “women’s films” and for “men’s” adventure films, Rodway attempted to negate the concept that women’s real pleasure came from (or should come from) fashion, wifery, and motherhood.

Responding to a previously published letter by a man complaining of too many sappy romantic films, Mrs. C. Biddle of Birmingham railed, “I feel I cannot let a letter

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<sup>388</sup> Ibid.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid.

<sup>390</sup> For in-depth analysis of ‘woman’s films,’ see Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987) and Sue Harper, *Women in British Cinema: Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know* (New York: Continuum, 2000).

<sup>391</sup> Taves, *Romance*, 127.

such as Mr Hamilton's go unchallenged without taking up cudgels on behalf of my sex."<sup>392</sup> She argued that most women would prefer to see "wonderful pictures like *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*," which did not depend on "Cinderella stories, beautifully groomed Prince Charmings, and sloppy final scenes minus dramatic values."<sup>393</sup> *Bengal Lancer*, according to Biddle, appealed to women because it did not force-feed audiences with heterosexual romance and the traditional happy ending. Mrs. E. M. Pryce of Yorkshire lauded "the pictures which rely upon *action*, as witness *The Lives of a Bengal Lancer*."<sup>394</sup> Miss Rosalie Archer of Gravesend wrote that she and her fellow schoolgirls wanted "More *Beau Geste* and *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* films...and fewer musicals with either no plots or fantastic romances."<sup>395</sup> "Action" and strong plotlines, according to these letters, were more important to women viewers than sloppy romance designed to move them to tears. Women, these letters argue, were as drawn to adventure as their male counterparts and were just as dismayed by the overly-romanticized films that the studios assumed women would find attractive.

### **Conclusion**

What was at stake for women in declaring their preference for adventure films over the domestic melodramas that were overtly marketed to women? Women's claims to abhor domestic melodramas—which of course must be taken with a grain of salt since women's films remained big box offices draws throughout this period—promoted the idea that women could garner enjoyment from something other than 'traditional' domestic life. Women, these letters argued, as much as men could derive joy from the

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<sup>392</sup> "What Do You Think? Letters from Our Readers," *The Picturegoer* (16 July 1938), 28.

<sup>393</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>394</sup> "The Screen Parliament," *Film Pictorial* (8 July 1935), 34.

<sup>395</sup> "The Filmgoer Speaks," *Film Weekly* (19 June 1937), 23.

kinds of bloodthirsty adventure India films offered. If being wives, mothers, and homemakers was their lot in life, they argued, it was not because women had any illusions about true love or their husbands being dashing princes. Their enthusiasm for India films, letters suggest, proved women to be more rational and thrill-seeking, less satisfied with their restrictions as wives and mothers, and less moved by the promises of familial joys than they believed men assumed.

Looking at audience writings and responses should give us pause about making generalizations about audience responses based solely on generic themes and force us to reconsider the ways in which we use texts to understand histories and societies. Textual analysis, which is how so much scholarship has addressed India films, has suggested that British audiences saw India films in single-minded, prescriptive ways. These films, according to much previous scholarship, were masculinist, sometimes misogynistic, adventures that promoted Orientalist racism and nationalist patriotism. Writings from female viewers, however, demonstrate that, as Gaylyn Studlar has argued, “Actual spectators’ responses are much more unruly” than those of scholars’ idealized spectators.<sup>396</sup> From the moment women entered the theater, they stepped out of their rigid roles and routines and into a world of Oriental splendor. India films offered them a chance to eschew their roles as homemakers. Not only did women identify with what have been defined as men’s films, they used these bellicose adventure stories to discuss and reimagine notions of femininity and female desires. Female viewers saw India films, which often rejected and mocked domesticity, as speaking to their own concerns about their identities as wives and mothers.

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<sup>396</sup> Gaylyn Studlar, untitled article, *Camera Obscura* 20/21 (May/September 1989), 303.

## Chapter Four

### Pig Skins, Rope Tricks, and Elephant Boys: The British Indian Community and Responses to India Films

In 1986 British schoolteacher Rozina Visram published her now seminal *Ayahs, Lascars, and Princes: Indians in Britain, 1700-1947*.<sup>397</sup> Visram, a British schoolteacher, hoped to tell a story she felt few of her students knew and one that seemed to be completely absent from the academic histories of the moment—the history of the thousands of Indians who came to settle in Britain in the years before Indian independence. As the scholarship of the 1990s turned increasingly towards imperial history and the British diaspora around the empire, several scholars began to explore the long-standing South Asian community in Britain, most notably Shompa Lahiri, Michael Fisher, and Antoinette Burton.<sup>398</sup>

The sixtieth anniversary of Indian independence seems to have sparked an even greater interest in exploring this history. In 2007 the National Archives opened *Moving Here*, a website that “records and illustrates why people came to England over the last 200 years and what their experiences were and continue to be.”<sup>399</sup> In September 2010 The Open University launched the *Making Britain* database, dedicated to “information about South Asians in Britain from 1870 to 1950, the organizations in which they were

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<sup>397</sup> Rozina Visram, *Ayahs, Lascars, and Princes: Indians in Britain, 1700-1947* (Dover, NH: Pluto, 1986).

<sup>398</sup> Notable exceptions include Antoinette Burton, *At the Heart of Empire: Indians and the Colonial Encounter in Late-Victorian Britain* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998); Shompa Lahiri, *Indians in Britain: Anglo-Indian Encounters, Race, and Identity, 1880-1930* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2000); Michael Fischer, *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travelers and Settlers in Britain, 1600-1857* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003); Michael Fischer, Shompa Lahiri, and Shinder Thandi, *A South-Asian History of Britain: Four Centuries of Peoples from the Indian Sub-Continent* (Westport, CT: Greenwood World Publishing, 2007). Rozina Visram has also continued her own writing and research. See her *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History* (London: Pluto Press, 2002).

<sup>399</sup> “About this Site,” *Moving Here*, <http://www.movinghere.org.uk/about/default.htm> (accessed 17 November 2010).

involved, their British connections, and the major events in which they took part.”<sup>400</sup> As part of the database launch, *Making Britain* brought together more than thirty scholars whose work explored South Asians in Britain, suggesting that the Indian community in Britain will increasingly be a part of British history, one that recognizes that British history is not one clearly defined in racial or ethnic terms.

My last chapter looked at some audience responses to films about India. It focused primarily on writings from white British audiences because their letters were overrepresented in letters to the editor to British film magazines.<sup>401</sup> Yet this obscures the fact that an ever-growing Indian expatriate community developed in Britain in this period. This chapter argues that debates around India films highlight the established and growing community of Indians in Britain that existed long before the better studied post-Windrush era after 1950. These writings demonstrate the ways in which the Indian community attempted to define their relationship with the white British community.

Lahiri argues that in the interwar period “South Asians laid claim to the fruits of imperial citizenship and British subjecthood” but that over the same period “the British government took measures to strip South Asians and other non-European colonial residents of their rights as British subjects.”<sup>402</sup> As their community grew and became more prominent, Indians in Britain sought ways to understand their place in Britain. So too did their white neighbors. This chapter explores three visions for the Indian community in Britain that circulated around India films of the 1930s.

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<sup>400</sup> “About the Database,” *Making Britain*, <http://www.open.ac.uk/makingbritain/content/about-database> (accessed 17 November 2010).

<sup>401</sup> In fact in the hundreds of volumes of magazines I consulted, I found letters from only 3 writers who self-identified as Indian.

<sup>402</sup> Lahiri, 134.

In May 1935 the Imam of the Woking Mosque wrote to the High Commissioner for India about his concerns about *The Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, which was scheduled to be released in Britain later that year. His frustration lay with the film's representations of Indian Muslims, particularly what he saw as a caricature of Islamic beliefs and religious practices that he feared would contribute to alienation between Muslims in Britain and their non-Muslim neighbors. He believed that the British government should intervene on behalf of its Muslim citizens. He argued that the government should approach the Indian community from a multiculturalist stance, one that protected, accepted, and even celebrated social and religious differences. The response from the India Office, which eventually resulted in Paramount editing the film for the British market, suggests that officials had begun to understand Indians in Britain as having interests unique from Indians in India and needed to be approached as a distinct British community.

Film fan magazines printed several letters from Indians living in Britain who took exception to the film industry's representations of Indians. These letters argued that the Indian community in Britain would function best if it was integrated into the wider British community, something letter writers believed Hollywood's representations of Indians made more difficult. They challenged the white British community to join together with its Indian neighbors in rejecting such images. Responses from white British readers argued that they did not accept Hollywood's representations of Indians as reality and dismissed it as a problem of Hollywood's overdramatization of history, not one of British racism. They claimed that Indians were too sensitive and overestimated white British intolerance. They believed that Indians could easily be integrated into

British society once Indians stopped singling themselves out as a uniquely victimized community and recognized Hollywood as an enemy common to white and Indian alike.

In the end, the vision that reached the largest white British cinema audience was one that came from the British film industry, not from the Indian community itself, one that the film industry projected onto the image of Sabu, a child star of the 1930s and 1940s. The studio consciously created a life story for him that emphasized Sabu as a ‘real life’ Indian orphan adopted by Britain. His biographies stressed the ways in which he was like any other British schoolboy. The model for imperial immigration Sabu embodied—one that drew heavily on the idea that immigrants should seamlessly assimilate into an artificially homogeneous white British community—suggested imperial immigrants should practice absolute assimilation, an expectation that gained strength throughout the influx of imperial immigration in the 1950s and 1960s.

### **Pig Skins and Cultural Pluralism**

As I discussed in my second chapter, in 1931 Paramount was in the beginning stages of producing *The Lives of a Bengal Lancer*. Censors in America and Britain expressed little concern over using Francis Yeats-Brown’s book of the same name. The MPA’s reader Elizabeth North declared the book, “highly interesting” but ultimately “contained no story interest and the personal narrative is not such as could be used for motion picture purposes.”<sup>403</sup> After reading Paramount’s 1934 scenario, Hanna described the film as “Hollywood melodrama pure and simple” and believed, “The story is quite

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<sup>403</sup> Motion Picture Association of America Production Code Administration records, 1927-1967, “The Lives of a Bengal Lancer,” Collection 102, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles.



harmless. It has no political significance...”<sup>404</sup> Aside from deleting a few words and a strong suggestion that torture scenes be avoided, the BBFC had little say.

Indian audiences clearly disagreed. As early as March 26, 1935, two months before the film’s release in India, representatives to the Indian Legislative Assembly began expressing concerns.<sup>405</sup> MP Sir A. Wilson raised the issue to the Secretary of State for India later that month, asking, “Will my hon. Friend get into touch with the Government of India and point out to them that this film, certainly in this country, must do the greatest harm to our Moslem fellow-subjects?”<sup>406</sup> With concerns mounting about the Indian nationalist movement, the Secretary of State assured Wilson that he would request that the United States consider censoring films that might offend their Indian allies. The response the Secretary received was that

there is no official censorship on film in America, but there is an unofficial arrangement whereby producing companies in Hollywood do, in their own interests, make a practice of seeking advice on the suitability for Empire audiences of films which they propose to produce.<sup>407</sup>

Wilson’s concerns for his “Moslem fellow-subjects” seem to have been focused on Muslims “out there” in the empire—he requested that the Secretary of State for India intervene, rather than suggesting an intervention on the part of the British government—not necessarily Muslims living in Britain.

On May 7, 1935, Maulana Aftab-ud-Din Ahmad, the Imam of the Woking mosque, England, sent a letter of concern to the High Commissioner for India. Ahmad’s

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<sup>404</sup> “It has no political significance” was, as Jeffrey Richards points out in *Age of the Dream Palace*, Hanna’s shorthand for saying that there was no suggestion of changing the status quo, that the film clearly demonstrated support of the current state of affairs. See Richards, 143.

<sup>405</sup> See Priya Jaikumar’s discussion of this debate.

<sup>406</sup> “SHORT NOTICE QUESITON AND ANSWER FILM NAMED ‘BENGALI’ EXHIBITED IN EUROPE” (27 March 1935), “Protests at offensive incidents in the film ‘Lives of a Bengal Lancer,’ 15 March 1935 – 23 October 1935,” (IOR/L/PJ/7/831 File 893, British Library, London).

<sup>407</sup> Ibid.

concerns, unlike those of Indian legislators, captured the attention of officials in Britain because they believe was in a position to speak for Indians living in Britain. For Ahmad, the Muslim community would function best and best contribute to British society when officials sought to protect and honor these differences. As British such officials needed to address these concerns, not simply pass them on to imperial administrators.

Ahmad became the Imam of the Working Mosque in 1934. He had first come to England in 1931 to serve as the mosque's assistant imam. He returned to Lahore for two years before returning to Woking to assume responsibility as the mosque's chief imam. In 1939 he returned to India permanently.<sup>408</sup>

If Ahmad's tenure in England was relatively short, in assuming responsibility as the imam of the Shah Jehan Mosque in the London suburb of Woking, he became part of a relatively long-standing institution. Established in 1889, the Woking mosque was Britain's first purpose-built mosque.<sup>409</sup> It became "the hub of Muslim activity in Britain" in the lead-up to the First World War and remained so until after the Second World War.<sup>410</sup> According to historian Humayun Ansari,

Together with its offshoot in London, the Muslim Society of Great Britain, it frequently organized what were essentially *dawa* (invitation to Islam) activities—annual and Friday congregations, lectures on religious issues, public 'at home'-type celebrations—...attracting Muslims from all over Britain.<sup>411</sup>

The Woking Mission, however, continued to lobby the British government for a building site for a mosque that could better serve the demands of the growing Muslim community

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<sup>408</sup> "Life Sketch," (*Maulana Aftab-ud-Din Ahmad, 1901-1956*: [www.aftabuddinahmad.com](http://www.aftabuddinahmad.com), accessed 10 October 2010).

<sup>409</sup> Humayun Ansari, *The Infidel Within: Muslims in Britain since 1800* (London: C. Hurst and Company, 2004), 126.

<sup>410</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>411</sup> *Ibid.*, 341.

in London—a request eventually granted after Ahmad’s tenure by Churchill’s war cabinet in 1940 as a tribute to Indian service in the First and Second World Wars.<sup>412</sup>

While Paramount had not yet released *Bengal Lancer* for exhibition in Britain at the time of Ahmad’s letter, reports on its Viennese release circulated in the Indian press, and Paramount had already released the film in some Indian districts. The Imam’s concerns, then, were likely based on these second- and third-hand accounts. His letter explained that his “attention [had] been drawn to the objectionable nature of a film entitled ‘The lives [sic] of a Bengal Lancer,’” and he went on to express concern about the imminent release of the film in British cinemas.<sup>413</sup>

Ahmad’s unease about *Bengal Lancer* focused on two specific scenes. In the first, “[an] Afghan spy is captured by the British and bullied into confession by threats of having swine’s flesh gorged into his throat.”<sup>414</sup> In the second, “Muslim Prayer is caricatured in as much as it is suggested in the representation that the Muslims never apply their minds and hearts to their prayers; that they simply make a show of prayers while their minds are replete with mundane affairs.”<sup>415</sup>

His frustration, according to his letter, was not necessarily based in his belief that these scenes to be offensive or inaccurate, even though he believed this to be true as well. Instead he couched his concerns in terms of preserving relationships between the Indian community in Britain and their white neighbors, which he believed such scenes might

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<sup>412</sup> Ibid.

<sup>413</sup> Letter from Aftad-ud-Din Ahmad to the High Commissioner for India (7 May 1935), “Protests at offensive incidents in the film ‘Lives of a Bengal Lancer,’ 15 March 1935 – 23 October 1935,” (IOR/L/PJ/7/831 File 893, British Library, London).

<sup>414</sup> Ibid.

<sup>415</sup> Ibid.

sour. In terms of the suggestion that the spy would not receive “49 maids” in the afterlife if he died having been defiled by “swine’s flesh,” Ahmad argued,

It is my duty to submit here that this remark is not only baseless, but forms part of a malicious propaganda against Islam which stands condemned before the judgment seat of enlightened Humanity.<sup>416</sup>

Such images, according to Ahmad, created an environment in which Britain’s Muslims would remain ostracized from the wider community. The film studios reduced their religious beliefs to exoticized stereotypes that the studios never tempered with more accurate cinematic representations. Rather than seizing the opportunity to teach audiences about Muslim religious beliefs, according to Ahmad, Paramount had quickly dismissed the religion by seizing on caricatures of its followers’ beliefs.

Officials in the India Office were quick to act on Ahmad’s concerns in a way they had not when Indian legislators had raised concerns only two months before. What made Ahmad’s complaint different from those of Indian legislators and what caught the attention of British officials was that he painted the problem as one that concerned the unity of Britain, not just one that affected or needed to be solved for India or the Empire. Ahmad warned that “The false propaganda and misrepresentation portrayed by this unfortunate film has justly roused a considerable amount of indignation in the Muslim Community in Great Britain.”<sup>417</sup> Moreover, Ahmad lodged his complaints from what British officials believed to be a position of power and knowledge in the Muslim community in Britain. Robert Peel, secretary of the India Office’s Public and Judicial department believed that, “The Imam is entitled to speak for a considerable body of

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<sup>416</sup> Ibid.

<sup>417</sup> Ibid.

Muslim opinion in this country,” and therefore believed that the Imam’s complaint warranted serious consideration.<sup>418</sup>

The official debates that circulated around the film and Ahmad’s letter demonstrates that while Britain was becoming home to a growing community of Indians, some officials were unsure about their role in Britain or the role British officials should play in representing them. Lahiri characterizes the interwar period as one marked by increasing government restrictions on the Indian community in Britain.<sup>419</sup> Considering India’s considerable contribution to the war effort, many hoped to take advantage of promises of imperial citizenship earned through this service. Based on the treatment Indian soldiers received during the war, this later “renegotiation” may not seem especially surprising. Indian soldiers wounded on the western front received care at Kitchner Hospital in Brighton. As fears about contact between soldiers and white women mounted, the hospital became more like an internment camp. Officials erected barbed wire and fences, posted sentries, and forbade white women from entering at all and soldiers from leaving without permission and a chaperone.<sup>420</sup>

After the war, the government enacted new laws that often circumvented Indians’ abilities to operate as British subjects. In 1925 the Home Secretary ratified the Coloured Alien Seaman Order, which required that any seamen who could not produce proof of their British citizenship—documentation of which was almost nonexistent—register as ‘aliens.’ In 1929 the government asked local police agencies to pay special attention to Indians applying for peddling licenses to look for deserters from shipping license

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<sup>418</sup> Letter from Robert Peel to J. Brooke Wilkinson (6 June 1935), “Protests at offensive incidents in the film ‘Lives of a Bengal Lancer,’ 15 March 1935 – 23 October 1935,” (IOR/L/PJ/7/831 File 893, British Library, London).

<sup>419</sup> Lahiri, 134.

<sup>420</sup> Lahiri, 131.

companies who could be subject to deportation.<sup>421</sup> Many applicants were, in fact, demobilized Indian soldiers who had chosen to remain in Britain at the end of the war.<sup>422</sup> In 1930 the government began to require rural Indian peddlers to carry passports. Ansari argues that for Indian Muslims in particular, white British public opinion was split between distrust and respect of Muslim contributions in the Great War.<sup>423</sup>

The quick response to Ahmad's appeal is, then, somewhat surprising. But the debate about how to approach Ahmad's complaint demonstrates this ongoing ambiguity. The very day Peel received Ahmad's letter he sent a letter marked "IMMEDIATE BY HAND" to Joseph Brooke Wilkinson, the secretary of the BBFC, asking that "the question be treated as urgent in order that such action as may be considered appropriate by the British Board of Film Censors...without delay."<sup>424</sup>

Brooke Wilkinson expressed a reticence to act on behalf of Britain's Muslim community when it seemed to him that India's own film censors were uninterested in the film. In a letter to G. E. Shepherd of the India Office, Brooke Wilkinson explained, "we saw no reason to act unless and until the Government of India asked us to do so."<sup>425</sup> He went on to argue, "Incidentally, it is not particularly desirable to encourage the Imam of the Mosque by initiating this kind of action at his insistence unless we have good independent reason for doing so."<sup>426</sup> As far as Brooke Wilkinson was concerned, the Indian community in Britain was purely and unambiguously an extension of the Indian community in India, subject to the decisions and judgment of the Indian government and

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<sup>421</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>422</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>423</sup> Ansari, 134.

<sup>424</sup> Ibid.

<sup>425</sup> Letter from J. Brooke Wilkinson to G. E. Shepperd (22 May 1935), "Protests at offensive incidents in the film 'Lives of a Bengal Lancer,' 15 March 1935 – 23 October 1935," (IOR/L/PJ/7/831 File 893, British Library, London).

<sup>426</sup> Ibid.

therefore of no consequence to the BBFC. Catering to the Imam's demands, for Brooke Wilkinson, would accomplish nothing except encouraging Ahmad to believe that his position demanded official deference.

Instead, Brooke Wilkinson believed that the opinions of Indian community in Britain were inconsequential to his censors' work; if the Indian censors wished to intervene on their behalf, he was open to their suggestions. Otherwise Indians, even those living in Britain, were none of his concern. The British in the British Board of Film Censors was, it seems, as much an ethnic distinction as a national one for Brooke Wilkinson.

The Home Office disagreed with Brooke Wilkinson's assessment. For them, whether Ahmad's concerns about the film were the same as those of his compatriots in India was of only minor consequence. What really mattered was that Ahmad spoke as a representative of a growing British community and as such his concerns demanded the BBFC's attention. The Home Office requested a report from Simla on India's reception of *Bengal Lancer* in the hopes of pressing the issue with Brooke Wilkinson. Officials in India informed him that while Paramount had released the film in parts of India and that it was being screened without complaint, this was only accomplished after "excisions recommended by Film Inspector relating to incidents of defilement by contact with a pig's carcass" had been made.<sup>427</sup> Armed with this knowledge, the Home Office again tried to approach Brooke Wilkinson, hoping, it seems, that this information would encourage the British censors to make similar deletions on behalf of the Muslim community in Britain.

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<sup>427</sup> Telegram from Government of India to Secretary of State for India (1 June 1935), "Protests at offensive incidents in the film 'Lives of a Bengal Lancer,' 15 March 1935 – 23 October 1935," (IOR/L/PJ/7/831 File 893, British Library, London).

Brooke Wilkinson was still unconvinced that his office was responsible for this work. In a handwritten note to Peel on June 6, D. M. Cleary, of the Office of the High Commissioner, explained that, again, Brooke Wilkinson deferred to his Indian colleagues on the film. Cleary wrote,

Brooke Wilkinson said that one of the Indian Film Censors (I think he said the Bengal Censor) is here now on leave and that he had spoken to him & the Ceylon censor (who is also here) about the film. He asked them both to see the film in London which they did and gave it their opinion that there was nothing which need be cut out from the film as shown over here.<sup>428</sup>

Even the Indian censor, it seemed, saw the British market as one that need not be concerned with the sentiments of Indian viewers. In the end, while Brooke Wilkinson “did not take the Imam too seriously & in fact, was becoming rather tired of him,” he grudgingly contacted Paramount to see what they might do to ameliorate the situation.<sup>429</sup> He acted, it seems clear, more in the hopes of placating officials in the Home and India Offices than out of any concern for the film’s effect on Muslim audiences in Britain.

For its part, Paramount agreed to edit the film for British distribution, removing the two scenes that concerned Ahmad and the Bengal Board for copies distributed to the British market. Both scenes were incidental to the film’s plot and were easily lifted without any rescripting, which meant that it would cost little to recut the film. But there was a catch. Paramount did not confirm their agreement until June 7, only days before they planned to release the film. The original, uncut film was already in the hands of cinema owners in Britain. Paramount assured Brooke Wilkinson that all subsequent releases would include the promised edits, but recalling the already-dispatched cans

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<sup>428</sup> Ibid.

<sup>429</sup> Letter from G. E. Shepperd to Robert Peel (7 June 1936), “Protests at offensive incidents in the film ‘Lives of a Bengal Lancer,’ 15 March 1935 – 23 October 1935,” (IOR/L/PJ/7/831 File 893, British Library, London).



would be too much of a financial burden for the company. The original release would still contain the offensive scenes.

Brooke Wilkinson could have chosen to ban the film based on the BBFC policy of excising any material that mocked religions practices and required Paramount to make the changes before the film could be exhibited in Britain. Such demands might have created a strain between the BBFC and Paramount, but for once the BBFC clearly had the upper hand. If they refused to put their stamp of approval on the film and therefore threatened its exhibition in local districts, it would have significantly hampered Paramount's potential for profit on the production. Yet Brooke Wilkinson readily agreed to Paramount's plan.

The debate did little to immediately effect Paramount or the genre of India films. When Geoffrey Shurlock, Breen's assistant, received word from the head of the MPPDA's Foreign Department, Frederick Herron, that the "pig's skin scene in the film had proven extremely offensive to Indian audiences," Herron suggested that the MPPDA might require future projects to "have a separate sequence" for release in Muslim countries.<sup>430</sup> Shurlock quipped, "I don't suppose a scene like this will come up again in ten years..."<sup>431</sup>

Perhaps the pig-skin scene was a one-time event—and it is hard to judge the extent to which Paramount's well-publicized experiences influenced this—but Indian films in the spirit of *Bengal Lancer* certainly were not. Shurlock, Paramount, and the BBFC all failed to recognize that what Ahmad's letter had highlighted to the Home and

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<sup>430</sup> Telegram from Frederick Herron to Geoffrey Shurlock (27 May 1935), "The Lives of a Bengal Lancer," MPPAA Production Code Files (Los Angeles: Margaret Herrick Library). Note that there was no suggestion that such sequences simply be avoided completely to avoid offended Muslim viewers in a number of markets in the 1930s.

<sup>431</sup> Ibid.

India Offices was the futility in trying to define what it meant to be a “Muslim country.” Britain, Ahmad’s letter pointed out, would do well to recognize that its Muslim community made it a Muslim country in 1935 and that officials would need to recognize the needs of this community when making decisions on behalf of the nation.

**“I Like My Friends and Those Who are Good.”: Mutual Understanding**

Ahmad posted his letter directly to the India Office in the hopes that British officials might intervene on behalf of Muslim Indians. Other Indians attempted to use film fan magazines to reach white audiences in order to encourage a more tight-knit multicultural community, one that they believed would be based in mutual understanding between its white and Indian communities. Rather than request official intervention, as Ahmad had done, writers to film magazines hoped that they could appeal to their white neighbors to reject India films as racist and encourage them to seek out more accurate forms of information on which to base their impressions of Indians.

Indians, these letters stressed, were not so different from their white neighbors, and only in recognizing their similarities and rejecting stereotypes about their differences could a cohesive community form in Britain. But white readers saw these letters as accusing them of being racists, while they believed themselves to be world-wise and open-minded. White readers saw Hollywood as an enemy common to both the white and Indian communities. They argued that in recognizing this common enemy, rather than singling themselves out as particularly victimized by Hollywood’s practices, Indians might form closer relationships with their white neighbors.

Lahiri argues that “racism was a fact of life for many South Asians in Britain” in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>432</sup> They often struggled to find housing, to establish professional careers, and to navigate their place in a society that, at turns, labeled them as too eager to assimilate—the notorious ‘Babu’—or not assimilated enough—what Lahiri calls “slave[s] to heredity.”<sup>433</sup> Yet responses from white writers suggest that they were not only blind to these prejudices, they were at pains to argue that they simply did not exist. They argued vehemently that the white British community was fair and open-minded and that it welcomed Indian neighbors with open arms. Of course, at a time when the Indian community in Britain was still relatively small, few of these writers would likely have had much personal contact with Indians by which to judge their own prejudices. They blamed Hollywood for racist depictions of Indians, even then the films they discussed were actually British-produced and were adamant that Hollywood played no role in their own opinions.

In February 1947, *Picturegoer* published an article entitled “That Indian Rope Trick!” written by V. K. Rawa. Labeled by the magazine as a “well-informed writer,” it is unclear whether he had any connection to the British or Indian film industries. In fact, the only thing that seems to have made him “well-informed” was the fact that he had “lived in India all [his] life.”<sup>434</sup>

The article argued that in order to combat the inaccuracies of Western films about India, more Indian film producers needed to release films in the British market, no small request as I showed in the last chapter. Rawa railed, “Less than half a dozen important pictures about India have been made in the West in the last so many years, and even these

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<sup>432</sup> Lahiri in Fischer, Lahiri, and Thandi, 142.

<sup>433</sup> Lahiri, 100.

<sup>434</sup> V. K. Rawa, “That Indian Rope Trick!,” *The Picturegoer* (15 February 1947), p. 13.

are often grossly inaccurate, if not positively insulting.”<sup>435</sup> *Clive of India* was “an entirely anti-Indian and pro-imperialist version of Indian history.”<sup>436</sup> *The Rains Came* faltered by casting of Tyrone Powell as an Indian doctor, a portrayal that “was an absolutely un-oriental and certainly un-Indian character.”<sup>437</sup> And *Jungle Book* depicted Indians as “self-centered, greedy beings in the best tradition of Rudyard Kipling, and the humblest villager was as well dressed as many scions of royalty today.”<sup>438</sup> As if anticipating the kinds of critiques he might receive from *Picturegoer* readers, Rawa explained, “Of course, some people may argue that they don’t take these fantasies seriously, but when there is no other means of showing the true state of affairs [in India], the conclusion most people draw is that the pictures are quite authentic.”<sup>439</sup>

Rawa never, however, insulted nor even mentioned the British film industry. He blamed Hollywood “with its enormous influence over the masses” for “encouraging the idea of the average Westerner that India is a land of rajahs and nawabs worth millions apiece, snake charmers, magicians, dancing girls and ‘elephant boys.’”<sup>440</sup> He mocked the ignorance of Americans on subjects of Indian culture, recounting a story in which an American waitress, on discovering her customer was from India, asked him to read her fortune.<sup>441</sup> And he argued that the Indian film *Dr. Kotnis* (1946), which depicted the life of an Indian doctor living in China, gave “more accurate information about India than most American films set in India itself.”<sup>442</sup>

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<sup>435</sup> Ibid.

<sup>436</sup> Ibid.

<sup>437</sup> Ibid.

<sup>438</sup> Ibid

<sup>439</sup> Ibid

<sup>440</sup> Ibid.

<sup>441</sup> Ibid.

<sup>442</sup> Ibid.

All of this, of course, elided the fact that two of the four films Rawa cited were British—*Jungle Book* and *Black Narcissus*.<sup>443</sup> It seems unlikely that Rawa was unaware of this fact, yet he chose to lay the blame for these stereotypes at Hollywood's door. Poking fun at Americans for their ignorance accomplished two things. First, he framed the problem in terms, as I showed in my previous chapter, that white British audiences understood—Hollywood films as, at turns, laughable and frustratingly inaccurate in portraying world history and world cultures. Second, his argument played to white British readers' sense of pride, suggesting that, unlike Americans, they were worldly enough to understand the absurdity of stereotypes about Indians.

Several other Indians letter writers took a similar tack, blaming the ignorance of the Americans in Hollywood for the inaccuracies in India films. A.K. Bhattacharyya of Maida Vale blamed the inaccuracies in *Son of India*—which he deemed “really charming” overall—on “the fact that an Indian in America is known generally as a Hindu, and is characterized by a turban which distinguishes him from a Red Indian or a negro.”<sup>444</sup> America's “lack of knowledge of Hindu social customs” was at fault for things like the main character, Karim, “certainly a Muslim name,” going to see a Holy Man with “a fakir's face” and the fact that “one comes out of the picture with the impression at the background of one's mind that India is mainly a land of tigers and elephants.”<sup>445</sup> The problem, according to Bhattacharyya, lay squarely in America's

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<sup>443</sup> Korda was forced to seek refuge in the Hollywood studios in the late 1930s as German bombing raids threatened his London-based studio. While shot in the U.S., the film was an Alexander Korda Films production.

<sup>444</sup> “The Filmgoer Speaks,” *Film Weekly* (26 September 1931), 20.

<sup>445</sup> *Ibid.*

insular prejudices. Both Rawa's article and Bhattacharyya's letter apparently received little attention.<sup>446</sup>

One Indian writer, however, grabbed the attention and raised the ire of white readers. B.B. Ray Chaudhuri of London refused to lay the blame for racist visions of Indians at Hollywood's door, blaming British audiences for perpetuating such stereotypes by continuing to buy tickets for Hollywood's racist fantasies. In so doing, he struck a chord with white readers who insisted that the British were neither taken in by Hollywood's stereotypes nor were they racists. Those who responded to Ray Chaudhuri's letters argued that the problem of integrating the Indian community into white British society was not white Britons' prejudice against Indians but that Indian audiences believed the white British community to be universally prejudiced, xenophobic, and close-minded.

*Picturegoer* published the first of Ray Chaudhuri's letters in January 1940. Ray Chaudhuri, an employee of the Empire Press Agency in London, wrote to the editor with complaints about the representation of Indian characters in recent popular India films. He reasoned,

The production of such films as *Gunga Din*, *The Drum*, *Clive of India*, *Storm Over Bengal*, etc., should be stopped for sheer bad taste, if not for shameless or lying propaganda. Suppose India produced films exposing British barbarism and brutalities in Amritsar, North-West Frontier, or the vulgarity of denigrated Britons. I would like to see how the British public would tolerate them!<sup>447</sup>

His overt complaint was about the production of India films, but implicit in this objection was that white British audiences and officials allowed such portrayals to continue. He

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<sup>446</sup> *Picturegoer* published one response to Rawa's article from Desmond Bosen of Madras on May 10, 1946, who argued that Indian filmmakers were responsible for making more compelling films that would teach British audiences about India. The magazine awarded him the prize for the week's best letter.

<sup>447</sup> "What Do You Think?" *The Picturegoer* (20 January 1940), 28-29.

did not question what would happen if India produced film about American atrocities in the ‘Wild West’ but focused on the failure of white Britons to reject racist images of India. The fact that white audiences continued to purchase tickets for such films demonstrated to him their implicit support for such stereotypes.

The *Picturegoer* editor, who wrote under the pseudonym Thinker, posted his own response immediately. His remarks demonstrated outright disdain for Ray Chaudhuri’s argument, which he felt overstated the extent to which filmmakers singled out Indians as villains in the film industry. He argued,

I must confess that I find your statements too wild and unreasoned to carry much weight. All the films you mention had no intention of being propagandist. Englishmen are often being shown in a bad light both in our own and American pictures, but that does not mean that the picture is anti-British propaganda.<sup>448</sup>

For Thinker, Ray Chaudhuri’s concerns were unfounded because Hollywood misrepresented everyone equally and drew its cache of villains from all nations, races, and walks of life. Indians were only one of many groups that fell in Hollywood’s crosshairs.

Yet only six months before, Thinker had published a letter from Barbara Fletcher of Blackpool, mentioned in my last chapter, that voiced similar complaints but received a very different response from the editor. Fletcher was horrified by the representations of both white and Indians in films of “the *Bengal Lancer* formula.”<sup>449</sup> She saw such films as “nothing but swaggering sham heroics, designed to puff us up at the expense of our darker brethren.”<sup>450</sup> Fletcher was at pains to point out that, in reality, “the ‘natives’ are just as law-abiding as the British, let alone the Americans, and that they are neither

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<sup>448</sup> Ibid.

<sup>449</sup> “What Do You Think?” *The Picturegoer* (8 July 1939), 33.

<sup>450</sup> Ibid.

savages nor enemies but our civilized fellow-citizens in the empire.”<sup>451</sup> She felt that, “After *Gunga Din* and *The Drum*, it would be refreshing as well as fair play to make a film showing India at peace, and from the Indian standpoint.”<sup>452</sup>

Fletcher framed India films as a kind of attack on the unity of the empire, using films about Anglo-Indian conflicts to promote the idea of British superiority over its imperial counterparts, turning “fellow-citizen” against “fellow-citizen.” For her, Hollywood’s dastardly attempts at creating dissension among the empire’s citizens could be countered by producing films that showed Indians to be equal to white British characters, rather than portraying Indians as brutal warmongers. Thinker, who would later be so vehemently opposed to Ray Chaudhuri’s viewpoint, awarded Fletcher’s letter a prize for the week’s second best letter.

Three months after publishing Ray Chaudhuri’s letter, *Picturegoer* published a response from Brentford signed simply “An English Viewpoint.” “English” opened his or her letter tersely by calling Ray Chaudhuri’s views “rather pointless.”<sup>453</sup> For “English,” films were pure fantasy and filmgoers “visit the cinema with the sole idea of being entertained,” not because they particularly agreed with any universal viewpoints being sold by producers.<sup>454</sup> “English” believed that Ray Chaudhuri was overly sensitive, since he or she believed that when British audiences “see a certain film which does not actually glorify the British people, no one really worries much. We simply look on it as ‘another film.’”<sup>455</sup> He felt that Ray Chaudhuri’s complaint that India films “were in bad taste” was simply “very childish, as this could be said of quite a number of films if one

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<sup>451</sup> Ibid.

<sup>452</sup> Ibid.

<sup>453</sup> “What Do You Think?” *The Picturegoer* (2 March 1940), 28.

<sup>454</sup> Ibid.

<sup>455</sup> Ibid.



took the trouble to pull them to pieces.”<sup>456</sup> In the end, “English” believed that “B.B. Ray [sic] [was] a little prejudiced against the British.”<sup>457</sup>

In the same issue *Picturegoer* also published another letter from Ray Chaudhuri, a response to Thinker’s original dismissal. His views had not been swayed or tempered by Thinker’s remonstrations. For Ray Chaudhuri, Thinker’s and “English”’s responses were born from chauvinism. He scoffed,

You say, “Englishmen are often being shown in a bad light.” Maybe an individual Englishman—but that is quite a different story! Let the entire English nation be shown as “barbaric” in an anti-British film, as the heroic Afridis of the North West Frontier have been blackballed in anti-Indian films. I have yet to see an Englishman or any white man shown in a bad light in any film about the Orient. Has any film been produced to show the “snobbery, jobbery and robbery of white men in the East”?<sup>458</sup>

It was not simply that Hollywood used Indians as the foil in films. This, according to Ray Chaudhuri, might be left to pass. More importantly, he believed that Indians were only ever shown to be “barbaric,” because Indians only ever appeared in films that represented the Western version of Indian history.

But while Thinker—and for that matter, his counterparts at *Film Pictorial* and *Film Weekly*—praised white writers like those from my last chapter for standing up to the studios and for demanding accurate representations of British history in film, Thinker did not recognize the similar themes of frustration in Ray Chaudhuri’s arguments. He posted a response immediately after publishing Ray Chaudhuri’s March 2 letter. Still wholly unconvinced by Ray Chaudhuri’s argument, he queried,

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<sup>456</sup> Ibid.

<sup>457</sup> Ibid.

<sup>458</sup> “What Do You Think?” *The Picturegoer* (2 March 1940), 28.

Why should America or Britain want to make anti-Indian films? None of those you mention were made with any such intent. You wouldn't suggest, for example, that "Mutiny on the Bounty" showed Englishmen in a good light?<sup>459</sup>

For Thinker, there was simply no reason for the British or Americans to purposely denigrate Indians. The fact that India films posited Indians as villains meant little to him; British characters were sometimes posited as villains in Hollywood fantasies, too. Hollywood chose projects, not based on any racist bent, but because they believed the stories would sell well. And what seems to be at the heart of Thinker's rare defense of Hollywood's practices as historians was simply this—Hollywood got everyone wrong.

On March 23 *Picturegoer* published another response to Ray Chaudhuri's letters. Isabel H. St. C. Peacock of Pinner had "followed with interest the controversy concerning 'anti-Indian' films."<sup>460</sup> She tried to defend Ray Chaudhuri, explaining, "As a woman I feel that both 'Thinker' and 'English Viewpoint' are arguing from a purely logical, instead of a sensitive point of view."<sup>461</sup> What Ray Chaudhuri's frustrations demanded, according to Peacock, was an empathetic approach; she also implicitly "feminized" his argument as one based in emotion. Her letter attempted to bridge the gap between Ray Chaudhuri on one side and 'Thinker' and 'English' on the other. She explained,

Deliberately anti-Indian films could obviously serve no useful purpose from the English point of view, but the fact remains that for some reason the Oriental is nearly always portrayed as a most unpleasant person. This can only give great offense, and those of us who have Oriental friends, know it to be a great stupidity.<sup>462</sup>

Still she shied away from accusing Hollywood, or its audiences, of any malice towards Indians. She did not believe "that the films Mr. Chaudhury [sic] mentioned were made

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<sup>459</sup> Ibid.

<sup>460</sup> Ibid.

<sup>461</sup> "What Do You Think?" *The Picturegoer* (23 March 1940), 30.

<sup>462</sup> Ibid.

with the *intention* of being anti-Indian” but she also readily admitted that “there were certainly episodes and character portrayals in these films which could have easily been misconstrued as such.”<sup>463</sup> But again, Peacock blamed the problem on ignorance, not prejudice—“I think I can safely say that ignorance of India and Indians is responsible for a lot of what is portrayed in films dealing with India, far more than any wish to offend.”<sup>464</sup>

Thinker, who had been so aggressively opposed to Ray Chaudhuri’s letter softened to Peacock’s argument. He awarded her letter a prize for the week’s second best letter and responded, “I think you have put the point very well, and I think it was, in effect, what both ‘English Viewpoint’ and myself were thinking.”<sup>465</sup>

On April 13, *Picturegoer* published one final letter from Ray Chaudhuri. In his third letter, Ray Chaudhuri claimed to have “been receiving replies almost every day” to his first letter and while he could not possibly respond to all of his critics, he hoped that *Picturegoer* might publish another of his letters “as a general reply to all [his] critics, who accused [him] of being anti-British or prejudiced against the white people.”<sup>466</sup> To Ray Chaudhuri, critical letters “prove[d] beyond a doubt how propaganda films can create bigots and biased creatures who have forgotten to think logically.” Negative images like those in India films had so soured British public opinion towards Indians that white audiences could not, according to Ray Chaudhuri, see the logical critique in his argument.

In response to being accused by “English Viewpoint” of being anti-British, Ray

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<sup>463</sup> Ibid.

<sup>464</sup> Ibid.

<sup>465</sup> Ibid.

<sup>466</sup> “What Do You Think?” *The Picturegoer* (13 April 1940), 29.

Chaudhuri retorted,

I deny being anti-British, while I am not going to assert that I am pro-British. I always remember the passage of Erich Maria Remarque: “Do you like Americans? No. Italians? No. Germans? No. Russians? No. Englishmen? No. Then whom do you like?—I like my friends ... and those who are good.”<sup>467</sup>

His response seems to encapsulate the misunderstandings in conversations that circulated in film fan magazines. What, after all, did it mean to be “good”? For Ray Chaudhuri and Rawa, being “good” meant white audiences openly rejecting the racist stereotypes in India films, refusing to support an industry in which its Indian neighbors were so heinously denigrated. “Good” whites stood up for what was right and proved their commitment to a unified community by standing up for their Indian compatriots. According to Rawa and Ray Chaudhuri, the white and Indian communities would come together best if each developed mutual understanding, mutual respect, and dedication to exploring one another’s commonalities. For white responders, too, “good” Indians should find common ground with their white neighbors. This meant acquiescing to the fact that Hollywood distorted British history and national character as much as Indian history. “Good” Indians accepted that little could be done except forming a unified community by grumbling together about a common, unchangeable enemy—Hollywood.

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<sup>467</sup> Ibid.

### “Civilizing Sabu of India”: Assimilation<sup>468</sup>

For all the attempts of these real Indians—Ahmad, Rawa, Ray Chaudhuri—to shape the position of the Indian community in Britain, the Indian who would make possibly the biggest contribution to this vision was not only a child, but also, more than anything, a work of fiction created by the British film industry. London Films first introduced Sabu to British audiences in 1936 in the lead-up to the release of *Elephant Boy*, a film based loosely on Rudyard Kipling’s ‘Toomai of the Elephants,’ a story about a young Indian orphan and his pachyderm companion. Sabu made his debut in the lead role. Though difficulties between Korda and director Robert Flaherty plagued production, the film succeeded in both the British and American markets. That success was thanks in large part to its young star. Flaherty had handpicked Sabu for the lead role while filming on location in India. Like Toomai, Sabu was an orphan, and when Korda eventually revoked funding for the project, the crew brought Sabu back to England to finish the film at Korda’s London Film studios.

Sabu became the first bonafide Indian film star in Europe and America. He quickly proved one of Korda’s biggest box-office draws, appearing first in *Elephant Boy*, followed swiftly by *The Drum* (1938), *Thief of Bagdad* (1940), and *Rudyard Kipling’s The Jungle Book* (1942). While *Elephant Boy* grossed £100,000 in 1937, *The Drum*

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<sup>468</sup> Jackie Gold, “‘Civilising Sabu of India’: Redefining the White Man’s Burden in Twentieth-Century Britain,” in Susheila Nasta, ed., *India in Britain: South Asian Networks and Connections, 1858-1950* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan. This extract is taken from the author’s original manuscript and has not been edited. The definitive, published, version of this record is available here: [www.palgrave.com](http://www.palgrave.com).

This subtitle comes from the title of a 1939 article written by Katherine Roberts for the American film magazine *Photoplay*. She titled the article, “Civilizing Sabu of India: The Story of a Jungle Boy in a Modern World.” Interestingly, while many articles from British papers and magazines danced around the idea of the civilizing mission, none of them made it as explicit as Roberts.

earned £200,000 in 1938.<sup>469</sup> *Thief of Bagdad* won three Academy Awards (for best Art Direction, Best Cinematography, and Best Special Effects); *Jungle Book* was nominated for six. Korda's extensive marketing machine used Sabu's face to hawk everything from posters to Shredded Wheat, turbans to the Boy Scouts. In fact, Korda claimed in 1938 that Sabu received over 100 fan letters a day.<sup>470</sup>

Sabu, I will show, at once represented a uniquely twentieth-century figure while also drawing on familiar nineteenth-century themes, reassuring audiences that there was and always would be Indians loyal to the British. In a moment marked by the growing Indian independence movement, which the British press, as I show in my next chapter, often depicted as a group of radicals, opportunists, and schemers, Sabu's star text assured readers that there were still Indians loyal to the British. Above all else, they painted him as loyal, honest, and ultimately dependent on the guidance of white men. His biography, which overlapped with Toomai's in complex ways, painted him as the quintessential loyal Indian. But, to use film theorist Richard Dyer's term, Sabu's 'star text' seemed to suggest that the place for Indians still loyal to the empire might no longer be in India but in Britain.<sup>471</sup>

Sabu's 'real' name was Selar Shaik Sabu, though it seems disingenuous to talk about the 'real' Sabu.<sup>472</sup> Dyer argues that stars are almost always fictional creations, not

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<sup>469</sup> Charles Drazin, *Korda: Britain's Movie Mogul* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2002), 178-179.

Unfortunately for Korda, *Elephant Boy* cost £150,000 to produce.

<sup>470</sup> "Korda Begins a New Career," *Film Pictorial*, 10 December 1938, 13.

<sup>471</sup> See Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1979) and *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>472</sup> Most references will cite his 'real' name as Sabu Dastagir. When Korda brought Selar to London, Selar's older brother, Shaik Dastagir, accompanied him. An official at customs registered Selar's name as Sabu Dastagir, a name that would remain with the star throughout his career. See Philip Leibfried, *Star of India* (Duncan, OK: Bear Manor Media, 2010). Leibfried uses many of the same sources I have cited here, though he sees them as transparent sources on Sabu's life; I see them as fictional biographies that constructed a fictional character called Sabu.

representations of ‘real’ people, though the constant promise of discovering the ‘real’ person behind the image is a large part of stars’ appeal.<sup>473</sup> As much a fictional creation as any film character, the ‘real’ Sabu cannot be accessed in any of the biographies targeted to his audiences. Rather than attempting to access the ‘real’ Sabu, here I will investigate how contemporary biographies created a complex persona that included but also reached beyond his films. On one hand, biographers drew on familiar stereotypes like the White Man’s Burden and the loyal native, reassuring white audiences in a moment marked by the Indian nationalist movement. On the other hand, biographers dispatched with stereotypes like the negative image of the Western-educated Babu. Sabu’s start text suggests that while some of the tropes of imperial culture appealed to white audiences, by the late 1930s these audiences had already begun to imagine a new post-imperial relationship with India. This new relationship would play out in Britain, not India, and would be marked by immigration to Britain, not India. But Sabu represented a vision of absolute immigrant assimilation, one that brought with it untenable expectations for the imperial immigrants of the *Windrush*-era.

There is little doubt that film audiences in the 1930s and 1940s knew Sabu’s story well. Magazines, newspapers, biographers, promotional materials, and even his films retold the story repeatedly in the early years of his career. He was born the son of the greatest *mahout* (elephant driver) in the service of the Maharajah of Mysore. His mother died when he was only weeks old. His father died when he was eight, leaving him an orphan. A ward of the elephant stables, he survived on two rupees a month and a handful of rice. His greatest goal was to become the most famous mahout in all of India.

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<sup>473</sup> Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 2.

Then one day word came that several white men had come in search of a young boy to star in a new film. When they arrived at the stables, the men were bombarded by young Indian boys and their parents, all vying for the chance at the coveted role. Though he had no parents to battle for him and had never even seen a moving picture, the ten-year-old Sabu stood out from the other boys. In spite of his meager rations, Sabu moved a little more gracefully than the other boys his age; his eyes shone brighter. But his greatest attribute was his command over the giant beasts of the stables. The story to be filmed was about just such a boy, Toomai—a boy who lost his mother while he was still a baby, was raised by his *mahout* father who died when Toomai was still a boy, and who became a ward of the stables, adopting the elephants as family and saving his father's elephant from execution when it became uncontrollable mourning its trainer's death.

When the men chose Sabu to star in their film, he was overjoyed. In the next year of filming, he never disappointed. When Mr. Korda decided that the film was to be finished in London, Sabu bravely agreed to travel to England to complete the job. He said farewell to the elephants he had come to love like family. Soon the mountains of Wales replaced those of Mysore; the elephants at the London Zoo replaced his dearest elephant friend, Irawatha. This little orphan, who had survived on two rupees a month and a handful of rice, became one of the biggest stars in the British film industry.

In fact Sabu's own biography came to mirror Toomai's so closely that audiences seem to have had difficulty distinguishing between Sabu's own story and Toomai's. Two different respondents to the Mass-Observation film study, for example, referred to *Elephant Boy as Sabu*, as if it were a documentary of his life story.<sup>474</sup> Dyer argues that

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<sup>474</sup> Jeffrey Richards and Dorothy Sheridan, *Mass Observation at the Movies* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), response #23 from Compton study and response #21 from Odeon study. Seventeen-



star text operate within “a rhetoric of sincerity or authenticity,” the promise that the star “really is what he appears to be.”<sup>475</sup> Sabu’s ‘rhetoric of authenticity’ revolved around the frequently rehearsed story that he ‘really was’ an Indian orphan, just like all of his early characters—Toomai, Prince Azim (*The Drum*), Abu the Thief (*Thief of Bagdad*), Mowgli (*Jungle Book*). This casting allowed Korda to capitalize on Sabu’s image while also directing attention away from the capitalist benefits of using Sabu’s labor to create profitable films.

The confusion between Sabu and Toomai is understandable. Flaherty’s reputation as a documentarian probably encouraged audiences to see the film as a depiction of Sabu’s ‘real’ life. Few audiences would have known that when the film ran over budget, Korda recalled the crew back to England and spliced Flaherty’s footage with studio footage filmed by Korda’s brother, Zoltan, and had his scriptwriter, John Collier, construct a storyline that loosely tied together the disparate scenes based on a familiar Kipling story. Yet, popular biographies encouraged audiences to see Sabu’s life story as being eerily similar to Toomai’s.

Much of this information was likely to have been either a studio fabrication, the result of miscommunication between the studio and the news outlets, or both. Because of Flaherty’s connection to the film, reporters most likely expected that the stories they heard about the film reflected the star’s real life, and in fact Flaherty originally intended the film to be a documentary about an Indian boy and his elephant.<sup>476</sup> As early as 1935,

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year-old Brenda Edwina Jameson write, “*Sabu the Elephant Boy*, I thought, was a most spectacular film and of very great education value.” Forty-year-old Mrs. Perlberg wrote, “. . . ordinary people like us would prefer to see pictures of people we understand. *Magnificent Obsession* was ‘good.’ *Sabu* too.” Richards and Sherdian note, “She probably means *Elephant Boy* starring Sabu.”

<sup>475</sup> Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 10.

<sup>476</sup> Frances Flaherty and John Collier, *Elephant Dance* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1937), 14-15.

long before Korda actually released the film, magazines had begun to promote the film as a documentary about a ‘real life’ Indian orphan and his elephant friends.<sup>477</sup> The story clearly proved compelling, and Korda had no reason to rewrite it.

Sabu’s life story combined aspects of the White Man’s Burden—little Sabu saved from a life of miseducation and poverty by a group of white men—and an imperial rags-to-riches story—the poverty-stricken India orphan who rose to stardom, fame, and fortune in the imperial metropole through his determination and charm. The “rhetoric of authenticity” that evolved around Sabu also set him apart of the allegations of trickery attributed to Indian nationalists in the media of this moment. In all of his roles Sabu played characters who displayed steadfast loyalty, even when it cost him dearly. In *Elephant Boy*, when the other mahouts threaten to kill his father’s elephant, his dearest elephant friend, Toomai sets Kala Nag free, fleeing with him to the jungle. In *The Drum*, Prince Azim learns that if he allows his uncle (Raymond Massey) to defeat the British, local tribesmen will restore him to his rightful place as the leader of Tokot. However, Azim refuses to betray his British friends, sounding a drum to warn the British of the impending attack. In *Thief of Bagdad* Abu finds himself in all manner of uncomfortable situations—turned into a dog, shipwrecked on a deserted island, alone in a mountainous cave—because he refuses to leave behind his friend Ahmad (John Justin). He even gives up his own kingdom to save Ahmad from the executioner’s axe. In *Jungle Book*, when a villager sets his jungle home aflame, Mowgli stays to help his animal friends escape, risking his life in the process.

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<sup>477</sup> The first mention of the film I have found was in February 1935 in *Picturegoer*, which claimed to have received telegraphs from Flaherty himself describing a film about “an elephant boy who is mad about elephants.” *Picturegoer* promised, “Like *Man of Aran*, *Elephant Boy* will have no stars.”

Biographers assured audiences that Sabu was a ‘real life’ Indian orphan that they could trust. Film reviewers identified his honesty as a key element in his likeability. *Film Pictorial* explained that “his chief charm [was] his naturalness.”<sup>478</sup> Katherine Roberts of *Photoplay* called him “a very likeable kid—very direct.”<sup>479</sup> The film reviewer for *Film Weekly* lauded his ‘ease and naturalness.’<sup>480</sup> Biographers also reassured audiences of Sabu’s innate devotion to his friends. Flaherty’s wife, Frances, tells of Sabu spending all of his free time nursing Irawatha back to health when the elephant fell *mutsch*, hand-feeding him sugar cane and bamboo shoots, petting him, telling him stories, singing him songs.<sup>481</sup> Similarly, when Flaherty cast Sabu as Toomai, the boy “did everything in his power to show his gratitude to the white sahibs. He would help to make the beds, wash the dishes, or trim the lamps. No task was too irksome.”<sup>482</sup>

In fact, in spite of—even thanks to—his sudden success in Britain, biographers promised that Sabu maintained a sense of unwavering honesty and loyalty to his friends. Studio publicist Jack Whittingham further stressed Sabu’s steadfast character, explaining:

Once a man, woman, or child is a friend of Sabu’s, no matter from what station or of what type, they are friends, so far as he is concerned, for life. Nothing is good enough for them—no loyalty great enough.<sup>483</sup>

Told by a caretaker that he could stay up later than his normal bedtime after a studio party, Sabu staunchly refused, explaining that he “promised Mr. Korda” that he would always adhere to his curfew.<sup>484</sup>

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<sup>478</sup> “New Star,” *Film Pictorial*, 27 February 1937, 19.

<sup>479</sup> Roberts, 80.

<sup>480</sup> “The Drum,” *Film Weekly*, 9 April 1938, 24.

<sup>481</sup> Frances Flaherty, *Sabu the Elephant Boy* (London: Dent, 1937), 20-21.

<sup>482</sup> Jack Whittingham, *Sabu of the Elephants* (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1938), 50.

<sup>483</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>484</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

In fact, Korda continued to capitalize on the popularity of Sabu's likely fictionalized biography by encouraging his staff to continue to develop roles in which Sabu would play an Indian orphan. As Dyer suggests, stars exemplify "the way people live their relation to production in capitalist society."<sup>485</sup> Film reviewers depicted Sabu's films as capturing him in his 'natural state,' as a 'real' orphan caught on camera rather than Korda's ward whose labor was put to good use. As stars attempt to negotiate better terms, exert control over their commodified images they help to produce, or reject work in favor of jet-setting and posh recreation, the narratives that develop around these negotiations create models audiences can use to understand their own role in the capitalist system.

At the very moment when the *swadeshi* movement gained international attention and highlighted the critical role of Indian labor in sustaining the British and imperial economies, Sabu, it seemed, was unconcerned with payment for his labor. Still a child, he was not unable to question the politics of his role or the imperial landscape nor was he interested in garnishing any control over his film projects.<sup>486</sup> Biographers fetishized the luxuries bestowed upon him by Korda—a miniature coupe car, his camera, his bike, his watch, his tuition at an elite public school. Sabu, the archetypical loyal native, was unconcerned with the issue of fair compensation, grateful for anything he was given. He was simply, as one contemporary biographer quoted, "here to serve the masters."<sup>487</sup>

The story also capitalized on Sabu's youth, employing the oft-used trope of infantilization. As Shohat and Stam suggest, infantilization "posits the political

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<sup>485</sup> Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 6.

<sup>486</sup> As an adult, Sabu did block the release of one of his films, *Jungle Hell* (1956), which was apparently a bizarre compilation of stock travelogue footage and scenes Sabu shot for an unrealized television program. As a child, it seems unlikely that he had any control over his projects with Korda.

<sup>487</sup> Quoted in Whittingham, 50.

immaturity of colonized or formerly colonized peoples...[highlighting] an inbred dependence on the leadership of White Europeans.”<sup>488</sup> Sabu’s story hinged on just this kind of dependency. Making Sabu a ‘real life’ orphan also offered the opportunity for him to adopt and be adopted by a new family. Rather than simply ruling Indians from an administrative distance or assimilating them into western civilization, Sabu encouraged British audiences to think of Indians as potential members of the family. Sabu’s adopted family was comprised almost completely of white men; the Indian orphan found himself surrounded by white fathers. Alex and Zoltan Korda, Robert Flaherty, *Elephant Boy*’s cinematographer Osmond Borrodaille, and tutor Captain Thompson, were all charged and credited with Sabu’s civilizing and care.

In his films, too, Sabu was often in the care of a white foster father. In *Elephant Boy*, Sabu/Toomai turned to Captain Peterson (Walter Hudd) for protection when the Indian community turned its back on him for his loyalty to Kala Nag. In *The Drum*, Sabu/Azim is betrayed by his Indian uncle, in whose care he is left when his parents die, but rescued and returned to his throne by Captain Carruthers (Roger Livesey). Even as British audiences heard more and more that many Indians felt they no longer needed “white fathers’ to govern them, Sabu demonstrated that white fathers could play critical roles in the lives of Indians and inspire loyalty among the people of India by providing a guiding hand, even in the twentieth century.

The earlier trope of the White Man’s Burden focused on a dubious civilizing mission enacted upon Indians in India. Sabu, however, offered a different vision, one in which Indians might become assimilated immigrants in Britain. In the 1930s and 1940s the British media frequently seized on stories of India visitors, especially princes and

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<sup>488</sup> Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 140.

political figures, but focused on the temporary nature of their visits. The press often reminded audiences, for example, that while Gandhi, Nehru, and Jinnah had all lived in England, their residency as students had been brief.

Lahiri has shown the extent to which British anxieties about Indian students revolved around this transiency. British literature often painted Indians educated in England as villainous characters, simply waiting for an opportune moment to use their education to create a potent revolution against the British in India.<sup>489</sup> Of course, these stories often revolved around the figure of the ‘Babu,’ a character satirized in British culture for his cultural hybridism.<sup>490</sup> According to Lahiri, in British literature Indian characters educated in England often returned to India having lost a sense of identity in a way that made them dangerous—often rejected by white society in England and now discontented in India—and become revolutionaries as a means of acting out these personal frustrations on a political stage.<sup>491</sup>

This point was likewise made in films where Indian characters educated in England became the disenchanted villains of their respective films—Mohammed Khan (Douglas Dumbrille) in *The Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, Surat Khan (C. Henry Gordon) in *Charge of the Light Brigade*, Ghul Khan (Raymond Massey) in Sabu’s own film, *The Drum*.<sup>492</sup> Each of these characters was, according to their films, educated at either

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<sup>489</sup> Lahiri, 95. See also discussions in Benita Parry, *Delusions and Discoveries: India in the British Imagination, 1880-1930* (New York: Verso, 1998) and Christine Baxter, ‘The Genesis of the Babu: Bhabanicharan Bannerji and the Kalikata Kamalalay’ in Peter Robb and David Taylor, eds, *Rule, Protest, Identity: Aspects of Modern South Asia* (London: Curzon Press, 1978).

<sup>490</sup> Lahiri, 92-95. See also Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: ‘The Manly Englishman’ and ‘The Effeminate Bengali’ in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1995).

<sup>491</sup> Lahiri, 95-96.

<sup>492</sup> And these just represented better known characters from the later cycle of India films. A number of films produced before 1935 also revolved around similar characters.

Oxford or Cambridge. Fictional films too, then stressed an image of a transient Indian community in Britain.

Sabu's star text, on the other hand, portrayed him as an Indian who saw Britain as his permanent home. He reassured audiences that Indian immigrants like himself could easily and successfully assimilate into an artificially homogenous white British society and culture. In fact, Sabu's star text suggested his own distaste for other immigrants he saw as clinging to their 'native' ways. A story from Roberts's article illustrates how biographers contrasted Sabu with other Indians in Britain. She describes an encounter between Sabu and his Sikh bodyguards who became his almost constant companions around the time he began promoting *The Drum*:

He spoke to the Sikh in his own language, but, turning back to us, lowered his voice and, indicating both guards, said, "I think they know more English than they say. You know, they have been in England longer than I have." Then he added, "But who learns a language faster, a grown man or a young boy?" A boy of course. "Yes," said Sabu, "because a grown man wants to go out in the evenings and have a good time at night clubs. A boy can work." His own English is very good and has surprisingly little accent.<sup>493</sup>

Sabu accuses this 'older' generation of Indian immigrants, represented by his bodyguards, as holding tight to their own culture, despite the fact that they were perfectly capable of speaking English.

Sabu, on the other hand, was determined to speak 'good' English. When Sabu arrived in London, according to *Film Weekly* writer John K Newnham, he could speak "very little" English but "could understand what was being said to him." A little over a year later, he could conduct interviews in perfect English.<sup>494</sup> *The Daily Mirror* similarly listed "learn[ing] to speak good English" as one of Sabu's top priorities after arrival,

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<sup>493</sup> Roberts, 24.

<sup>494</sup> John K. Newnham, "Sidelight on Sabu," *Film Weekly*, 19 October 1938, 32.

quoting him as telling their correspondent, “I go back to school. I want to learn the English fast. . . . It is very hard.”<sup>495</sup> By 1939 *Film Pictorial*’s Sylvia Terry-Smith surmised that Sabu’s work had paid off so well that “his English puts many an English boy’s to shame.”<sup>496</sup> More English than the English, Sabu.

In promotional materials for Sabu’s early films the studio dressed him in what many white audiences would likely have seen as forms of “traditional Indian dress.” Stills for *Elephant Boy* showed him bare-chested, wearing a white loin cloth and turban (and almost always riding atop an elephant). For *The Drum* in an open-front, bejeweled vest, and patterned turban. In images promoting *The Jungle Book* he was again bare-chested and for the first time bare-headed as well, with brushed-back, chin-length hair (sometimes peering out from behind a leafy branch).

But these were always Sabu “as” another character—Sabu as Toomai, Sabu as Prince Azim, Sabu as Mowgli. Pictures of Sabu “as himself” stressed familiarity to his white British audiences. No matter the occasion—driving a miniature coupe car, playing rugby, toying with a fancy camera, hawking Shredded Wheat, riding an elephant through London’s Christmas parade, waiting for a train at Waterloo Station, in a group shot with the stars of London films, at London’s Tea Centenary—Sabu was always in suit, sweater vest, tie, and turban.<sup>497</sup> Only his headdress marked him as anything other than a “typical” British schoolboy—almost the same, but not quite.

If his turban marked him externally as being different from his audiences, biographers encouraged readers to see Sabu as being like any other British schoolboy in

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<sup>495</sup> “Jungle Friends Didn’t Forget,” *The Daily Mirror*, 21 June 1937, 5.

<sup>496</sup> Sylvia Terry-Smith, “Pride of the Beaconsfield Rovers,” *Film Pictorial*, 11 March 1939, 8.

<sup>497</sup> By contrast, when Sabu toured the US in promotion of *The Drum* he appeared in bejeweled tunics and silk pants, often riding atop a milk white pony, just as he appeared in the film.



his heart. Newnham described him as “a normal enough boy in the things he does,” even though he did possess “a rare intelligence.”<sup>498</sup> Terry-Smith described him as laughing “more...than the average schoolboy,” but “as are most schoolboys, is happiest when making the loudest possible commotion.”<sup>499</sup> And when he complained of not being allowed to pursue dangerous activities like car racing and downhill skiing, she reminded readers, “Hasn’t that been the complaint of every schoolboy who ever lived!”<sup>500</sup>

Biographers emphasized the extent to which Sabu had adapted to living in Britain by taking up “British” hobbies. He enjoyed tennis, amateur filmmaking, swimming in the ocean, rugby, horseback riding. He loved “swing and hot rhythm, yachting at Bourne End, fish and chips, exercising in the gym and swinging in the garden.”<sup>501</sup> He became the star of the Beaconsfield Rovers football team. He was “such a brilliant ice skater that he says he would like to become a professional if he left off film acting.”<sup>502</sup> He took an interest in airplanes and car racing, tearing around the Denham lot on his motorbike or in his miniature coupe car, a gift from Alexander Korda. In fact, if there were a stereotypically middle-class British activity for which Sabu was not claimed to have a passion, I have not found it.

Yet Sabu’s assimilation also put him in direct contrast with the recognizable trope of the western-educated Indian—the ‘Babu.’<sup>503</sup> Where the ‘Babu’ received ridicule for unsuccessfully mimicking the language of the British upper class, the press celebrated Sabu’s quick mastery of the British language. Where the ‘Babu’ was often weak and

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<sup>498</sup> Newnham, 32.

<sup>499</sup> Terry-Smith, 8.

<sup>500</sup> Ibid.

<sup>501</sup> Terry-Smith, 9.

<sup>502</sup> Newnham, 23.

<sup>503</sup> Lahiri, 92-95.

unathletic, Sabu was defined by his robustness and athleticism, conquering every sport he encountered. Where the ‘Babu’s’ embrace of British culture harbored the potential for deep-seeded discontent, Sabu’s loyalty was above question, his love for the British painted as childlike and pure.

Above all else, Sabu’s star text promised that the generation of immigrants he claimed to represent would be true British patriots. When Paul Holt asked him if he was afraid of a war starting in September of 1938, Sabu puffed out his chest and replied, “There will be no war. We are strong on the sea and in the air. The Germans could not stand long in a fight.”<sup>504</sup> He planned to stay in Britain forever, at turns planning to be a professional ice skater, a pilot, a filmmaker, a racecar driver, and an electrician at London studios. If he were forced to go back to India, he would take comfort in leaving his new home by becoming “a famous mahout” and riding “in the Delhi Durbar before the King-Emperor.”<sup>505</sup>

But even the “best” immigrants, the most gleefully assimilated like Sabu might have bouts of homesickness. Whittingham described Sabu’s pleading post-script to a letter to the head mahout of the Mysore stables: “Will you please write me a letter telling me all the news of my home and my friends and Irawatha.”<sup>506</sup> Sylvia Terry-Smith described him as having “a philosophical outlook about the apparent neglect of his friends in India” but admitted that his sadness showed through when he explained, “They seem to have forgotten me... I write them and they don’t reply, so what am I to do?”<sup>507</sup>

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<sup>504</sup> Paul Holt, “Portrait of Sabu, a Star at 14,” *The Daily Express* (12 October 1938), 23.

<sup>505</sup> Whittingham, 120.

<sup>506</sup> Whittingham, 96.

<sup>507</sup> Terry-Smith, 8.

But she assured readers that Sabu “never let anything worry him for long.”<sup>508</sup> He quickly shrugged off his hurt feelings: “I’ll go back to India to see [my friends] someday... And anyhow, I’ve made lots of friends here.”<sup>509</sup> Sabu’s inclusion into British society was, however, always predicated on this simplistic vision of adoption of British culture and unquestioning patriotism. Sabu created an expectation for audiences persuaded by his experience that this assimilation would come naturally, easily, and be embraced joyfully by his real-life successors.

The assimilationist model for immigrants for which Sabu literally became the poster child, the model that had found the greatest audience in 1930s and 1940s Britain, could not hold. No one could live up to the promises Sabu represented. Not even Selar Shaik Sabu, the child whose image was attached to the fantasy story that was Sabu. What British audiences in 1940 could not have known was that when Sabu left London to finish *Thief of Bagdad* in Hollywood, he would never look back. Their model immigrant, who promised he would never leave them, became a decorated gunner in the US Air Force, married American actress Marilyn Cooper, and opened a furniture store with his older brother just outside Los Angeles. He returned to Britain at intervals, to star in Michael Powell’s *Black Narcissus*, and to make some extra money reprising his role as “the real Elephant Boy,” performing in the circus. He would never be the British gentleman he had been groomed to be. He wouldn’t even return to India to be an interlocutor between the Indians and the British in moments of future crisis. The Americans, as British film audiences well knew, managed to steal all the good ones.

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<sup>508</sup> Ibid.

<sup>509</sup> Ibid.

If outright assimilation could not work in the ideal case, how could anyone expect it to work on the large scale in the 1950s when Britain saw its first major waves of immigrants from the empire? And yet Sabu's model—not those laid out by Ahmad, Rawa, or Ray Chaudhuri—loomed large as the *Windrush* generation arrived. But as the most recognizable representative of this future, Sabu's star text assured British audiences that even as Britain was becoming multi-ethnic, it would remain mono-cultural. Imperial immigrants, Sabu promised, would make no waves, make no demands, and make no changes to Britain except by diversifying the color of its skin. Sabu's image as the ideal imperial immigrant may have helped to shape white British expectations for imperial immigrants but also created untenable expectations for real post-war immigrants.

**Chapter Five**  
**From “Notorious Agitator” to “India’s Greatest Citizen”:  
 Gandhi in British Newsreels**

*“Gandhi is a tough old bird. He thinks he is a pretty hot subject, but he is testy and cranky to deal with. He heartily detested the ordeal of being filmed at Borsad, India, and did everything to discourage the interview. When the boys finally pinned him down, he refused to move out where the light would be favourable and would not speak above a whisper. He was nailed down only after a chase over half of India, through terrific heat and untold discomforts.*

*--Charles Peden, newsreel cameraman, 1932<sup>510</sup>*

On May 3, 1941 a volunteer from Mass Observation—an organization created by three young, middle-class British researchers to develop an anthropological study of everyday life in Britain—attended a screening of the Ministry of Information’s film “India Marches” at the Astoria Cinema in Streatham in order to gauge audience responses to the program.<sup>511</sup> The film depicted the activities of the Indian army, showing how fully modern the military in India had become. According to the volunteer, much of the film passed without comment. The film depicted images of soldiers rising at five in the morning, suggested that Hindus and Sikhs had put aside their differences to serve together, claimed that the Indian army had been fully modernized, and promised viewers that Indian soldiers were proud members of the empire. According to the volunteer, none

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<sup>510</sup> Charles Peden, *Newsreel Man* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, and Company, Inc, 1932), 15.

<sup>511</sup> Mass-Observation began in 1937 by anthropologist Tom Harrison, poet Charles Madge, and filmmaker Humphrey Jennings. Utilizing a volunteer workforce of primarily middle-class correspondents the organization set out to study the daily life of the British. Mass-O encouraged volunteers to go out into their communities and record the habits of their neighbors at work, in the streets, and at local events, meetings and ceremonies and compile detailed records of everything they saw and heard, even going so far as to recommend that volunteers eavesdrop on conversations in order to keep a finger on the pulse of those they studied. In practice this often meant that middle-class volunteers voyeuristically, if with the purest of intentions, monitored their working-class neighbors and reported on the “oddity” of their behavior. Volunteers compiled their observations in diaries that were eventually sent to Mass-O headquarters or dispatched their reports directly to Mass-Observation, depending on the project. One of its many endeavors was dispatching volunteers to local cinemas to report on responses to films and film programs, especially government shorts like “India Marches,” recording reactions such as any outbursts and gauging the effect of the film on the audience.

of these points elicited any response from the audience. Images of soldiers playing basketball and hockey likewise elicited no comment. Shots of Indian soldiers wrestling, on the other hand, roused the crowd, though the volunteer did not record what that comment actually was. He or she did, however, record the response elicited by images of Indian soldiers performing ballet. An audience member called out, “They are dancing like women.”<sup>512</sup>

The volunteer added his or her own thoughts on the reception of the film. He or she thought that “the film seemed to go down well with the audience,” but admitted that the parts of the film that drew the most attention were “the shots of activity which were different from that of the army ordinarily...: the Indian Ballet and wrestling which are common only to India received much better response than those shots which showed the Indian Army [drilling] and firing machine guns.”<sup>513</sup> He or she also concluded that “There was a certain amount of emphasis on the idea that India is proud to be part of the empire and is united to withstand aggression [sic] the audience seemed to swallow this.”<sup>514</sup> Apparently their lack of response suggested a level of complicity to the volunteer.

The volunteer, however, had not been wholly persuaded. He or she believed that the film placed “too much emphasis on the idea that India was becoming modernized and not enough upon the thought that ‘primitive culture is still intact.’”<sup>515</sup> The volunteer was concerned that “[if] the East is modernized it is no longer ‘mysterious or glamorous in any way.’”<sup>516</sup> It was well and good to show modern India, but the volunteer expected

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<sup>512</sup> “India Marches,” Mass-Observation Film Reports and Memos (Box 8: 17/8/A). Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex.

<sup>513</sup> Ibid.

<sup>514</sup> Ibid.

<sup>515</sup> Ibid.

<sup>516</sup> Ibid.

that it was mysterious, glamorous India that British audiences wanted to see. The volunteer also expressed concern that “[the idea] that India is united was pushed too hard.” In fact, “the film was ‘remarkably handy at forgetting to mention Nehru or Gandhi.’”<sup>517</sup> The volunteer, however, was fairly confident that it would be “unlikely that the public will notice this inconsistency.”<sup>518</sup>

There is no way of knowing whether or not this “inconsistency” bothered audiences of this particular film, though it is unlikely that it passed completely unnoticed.<sup>519</sup> Gandhi in particular was a featured player in contemporary informational shorts about India, particularly newsreels, and regular moviegoers were well aware of the fight for Indian independence thanks at least in part to its regular coverage in British newsreels. In spite of Peden’s complaints that he was an unwilling leading man, Gandhi became one of the genre’s early stars, a “pretty hot subject.” No less than fifty newsreels mentioned Gandhi between his first appearance in 1922, when Pathé called him a “notorious agitator,” and his death in 1948, at which time British Movietone News called him “India’s greatest citizen.”<sup>520</sup>

While Gandhi has been the subject of much scholarship from a variety of perspectives—from biographical to psychoanalytic to philosophical and religious to political—few scholars have analyzed his reception in Britain.<sup>521</sup> Scholars of Indian history, most notably several members of the Subaltern Studies group, have considered

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<sup>517</sup> Ibid.

<sup>518</sup> Ibid.

<sup>519</sup> The film did not have an especially large distribution. The Ministry of Information estimated that it would reach about 160,000 British audiences. See “Brief Summary of Films from India,” 22 March 1943 (India Office Records: Films From India, IOR/L/I/1/692).

<sup>520</sup> “London Indians Pay Homage to Gandhi,” *British Movietone News*, 5 February 1948.

<sup>521</sup> See for example, Erik Erikson, *Gandhi’s Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence* (New York: Norton, 1969); Judith Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); David Arnold, *Gandhi* (New York: Longman, 2000); Joseph S. Alter, *Gandhi’s Body: Sex, Diet, and the Politics of Nationalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000).

how Gandhi functioned as a fluid symbol among Indians.<sup>522</sup> But as late as 2005, historians Tim Pratt and James Vernon argued,

For all the wealth of work on Gandhi, little attempt has been made to consider how his thought and practice was received in the imperial center, leaving us to assume an unproblematic translation from colony to metropole. Often, it seems, we are left with the residue of that saintly image of Gandhi popularly propagated in both “East” and “West,” which tended to endow his politics with an inherent truthfulness and universality.<sup>523</sup>

In terms of films, scholars have assumed that British audiences consistently envisioned Gandhi as, at the least, bothersome, and at the worst, a dangerous threat to the British and their empire. Chowdhry, for example, argues that British audiences responded well to what they would have seen as the Gandhi-esque villain—small, bald, dressed in a *dhoti*, calling for the end of British rule in India, and revered as a kind of sage by masses of followers—in *Gunga Din* because “Gandhi was a permanent nuisance to the British.”<sup>524</sup> Barnouw and Krishnaswamy argue that British officials actively banned films about Gandhi in the 1930s, demonstrating “the extent of British determination throughout the decade to keep the passions of independence out of the film medium.”<sup>525</sup> This chapter will demonstrate that while British officials attempted to censor the image of Gandhi and the Indian independence movement well into the 1940s, for a number of reasons they were ultimately unable to do so effectively.

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<sup>522</sup> See for example, Shahid Amin, “Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Easter UP, 1921-2,” in Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds., *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 288-342; Gyanendra Pandey, “Peasant Revolt and Indian Nationalism: The Peasant Movement in Awadh, 1919-1922,” in Guha and Spivak, *Selected*, 233-287; Ashis Nandy, “Gandhi after Gandhi,” *The Little Magazine* 1, no. 1 (May 2000), 38-41.

<sup>523</sup> Tim Pratt and James Vernon, “Appeal from this fiery bed...”: The Colonial Politics of Gandhi’s Fasts and Their Metropolitan Reception,” *Journal of British Studies*, 44 (January 2005), 92. Pratt and Vernon argue that the British press interpreted Gandhi’s fasts in September 1932 and March 1943 through their already existing knowledge of fasts undertaken by suffragettes and Irish nationalists and through the new science of nutrition, respectively.

<sup>524</sup> Chowdhry, 153.

<sup>525</sup> Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, 123.



Officials walked a fine line. On one hand, allowing newsreel cameramen—most of whom worked for American newsreel companies—unadulterated rights to filming in India and exporting their films back to the States risked that American companies would use these films to promote the Indian nationalist cause. This might further sour U.S. public opinion on the empire. On the other hand, by censoring or denying export to films, officials risked damaging official Anglo-American relations. In fact, officials seem to have all but forgotten British cinema-going audiences in debates over representations of the independence movement in British newsreels.

My first four chapters have explored cinema audience reactions to popular films about India, arguing that in the interwar years British imperial culture increasingly was no longer simply a national or even an imperial project. Accessing weekly audiences' reactions to newsreel coverage about India is even more difficult. *Mass Observation's* coverage of screenings was sporadic at best, and its middle-class volunteers tended to project their own personal view of the audience onto their evaluations. *Mass Observation's* Worktown Survey did ask about viewers' opinions on newsreels as part of the general cinema programme but not about specific reels or storylines. Cinemagoers were unlikely to write to film magazines about newsreels; if they did, magazines were unlikely to publish them.<sup>526</sup>

My previous four chapters have used writings from film audiences in order to gauge reception of feature films. This chapter uses films themselves as evidence of reception from one subset of the audience, British newsreel editors. It argues that three factors shaped coverage of Gandhi in British newsreels—Gandhi's self-conscious

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<sup>526</sup> I found only one published letter-to-the-editor on the subject of newsreels in the three magazines I studied. Likewise, I found no letters-to-the-editor in the *Mass Observation Archive's* collection of letters to *Picturegoer*.

positioning before newsreel cameras, American interest in the Indian independence movement, and the work of British editors and censors. None of these factors, as I will show, ever completely determined the shape of that coverage, but all three were critical factors in influencing this coverage. This chapter analyzes British newsreel editors as a particularly influential audience for raw footage being exported from India, audiences that would help to reshape this footage for cinemagoing audiences, infusing it with their own readings. While Gandhi often determined cameramen's access to him and self-consciously attempted to shape his image in British media, he had no control over how those images would be interpreted, how his self-created symbolism might be recast in meaning, or even whether or not the media would take any interest in his actions. While American newsreel companies were responsible for creating film banks that they shared with their international offices and dispatched cameramen around the globe in order to fill those banks, they were at Gandhi's mercy for interviews and film snippets and had to work around British officials' constant attempts to censor images leaving India. British officials attempted to censor films leaving India while avoiding a backlash from American companies and the American government.

In the end, British editors had to try to make sense of the chaotic and mottled images of Gandhi that emerged from these battles. These contests for representation produced an uneven image of the Indian leader, one in which his identity swayed from that of a villain to that of a hero in a matter of weeks, depending on which player held the greatest control in any given moment. British newsreel editors recast raw footage often originally envisioned by cameramen as anti-imperialist commentary. In so doing, they often created stories about the independence movement that assured British audiences

that the empire remained a worthwhile project. American newsreels, which used the same footage as their British counterparts, described these images in drastically different terms. British editors shaped newsreel images of the independence movement and of Gandhi, sometimes producing stories that were altogether disconnected from the images they accompanied, often producing films that toed the official line on the Indian independence movement. But British newsreels never presented their audiences with any one consistent summarization of Gandhi.

This chapter considers several flashpoint moments in British newsreel coverage of Gandhi and the Indian nationalist movement in order to demonstrate how the triangular struggle to represent Gandhi shaped his image in British newsreels from his first appearance in 1922 until his death. I argue that the sometimes complimentary but often competing concerns of American agencies, British officials, and Gandhi himself continually reshaped how British editors constructed Gandhi's representation. By the time of his death in 1948 these needs had converged to such an extent that he became a hero in British newsreels, "India's greatest citizen."<sup>527</sup>

### **The International Newsreel Industry in the Interwar Period**

In order to understand how these competing interests came to shape Gandhi's image in British newsreels, it is first necessary to briefly discuss the shape and structure of the newsreel industry in this period. Weekly newsreel programs started in Britain in 1910 with two primary companies, Pathé and Gaumont British. Within a year these companies had begun producing twice weekly news programs. According to newsreel historian Nicholas Pronay, what made newsreels unique was not just that they "created the illusion that the viewer was actually witnessing the event" but that in less than twenty

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<sup>527</sup> "London Indians Pay Homage to Gandhi," *British Movietone News*, 5 February 1948

years the newsreel industry had combined world-wide coverage with world-wide distribution, a feat the print press had been unable to accomplish in more than a century.<sup>528</sup>

Newsreels, according to Pronay, also succeeded in overcoming internal boundaries in ways that the print press could not successfully accomplish:

Even in Britain, whose press was far in advance of the rest of the world, it is questionable if the newspapers could really be said to have breached the inner frontiers of education and class: the total circulation of the whole national daily press in 1914 was just over four million, out of a population of over forty million. Just how many of the ‘compulsorily educated ones,’ in Bernard Shaw’s phrase, amongst the working class were in fact up to reading a report of the Germany army by Wickham Steed, let alone digesting any of it, after their long working day?<sup>529</sup>

While cautioning that comparing newspaper sales to newsreel distribution numbers should only be taken with great care, he notes that while Movietone’s reels alone reached an audience of somewhere around 5 million, the *Daily Express* reached only about 2.2 million and the *Daily Mail* 1.5 million.<sup>530</sup> Pronay estimates that by 1934, twenty million people in Britain, “well over half the population between five and sixty-five years of age,” saw weekly newsreel broadcasts and “80% of the working class during their most formative and effective years, between fifteen and thirty-five in particular, received the newsreels as an absolutely regular part of their life at least once weekly.”<sup>531</sup>

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<sup>528</sup> Nicholas Pronay, “The Newsreels: The Illusion of Actuality,” in Paul Smith, ed., *The Historian and the Film* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 96 & 103.

<sup>529</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>530</sup> Pronay, n. 20. Pronay points out that newspapers were often shared with more than one reader and that the same person might buy more than one paper. To these reservations I would add that film audiences often attended the cinema more than once per week. Even with these reservations, however, I agree with Pronay that the numbers were clearly in the newsreel’s favor.

<sup>531</sup> Pronay, 112. Such assertions fly in the face of, for example, the argument made by Pratt and Vernon that they chose to focus on print coverage of Gandhi’s fasts because “the national newspaper press [was] the prime medium for the dissemination of news, and thus the major conduit through which competing understandings of Gandhi’s fasts were promulgated and discussed in Britain.” As such they also raise serious questions about a continuing focus on print press to the almost complete exclusion of newsreels in scholarship of interwar and wartime reporting as evidenced by the fact that Pronay’s short essay in an

If Pronay is correct, newsreels likely formed the primary source of information on world events for large portions of the British population, especially the working class.

All of the early newsreel companies that focused solely on local and national news stories failed by the end of the First World War.<sup>532</sup> For a time Pathé and Gaumont British remained the only international agencies, but by 1918 several more appeared in the British market.<sup>533</sup> The First World War had changed the face of the international newsreel industry. While America's film industry had been influential before the war, after it was unquestionably dominant.<sup>534</sup> Widespread conscription in Europe had decimated the independent British and French industries. Those filmmakers who had not been drafted into military services were often co-opted into working on government films.<sup>535</sup> Several film studios had to be closed completely.

Rebounding after the armistice proved especially difficult for the British newsreel industry because the American film industry had suffered far less disruption between 1914 and 1918. Just as they had in the feature-film market, American studios pounced on the opportunity, setting up foreign offices, increasing their coverage of foreign news, and

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edited collection in 1976 is still the go-to source of information on British newsreels. Other scholars and organizations have begun to try to rectify this discrepancy, most notably those involved in the British Universities Film and Video Council (BUFVC), which has put out several volumes of their *Researchers Guide to British Newsreels*. These include abstracts on publications on the subject of newsreels, finding guides for interviews from employees of the newsreel industry, and short (often contemporary) articles on particular aspects of the industry by former newsreel professionals. The BUFVC has also put together an undeniably helpful website, one that has been essential for my research here, that offers researchers the opportunity to search for newsreels released in Britain and lists information on who currently holds these films and in many cases a brief synopsis of the film. In some cases they even give access to digitized versions of primary sources like cameramen's dope sheets and commentary revisions. Historian Luke McKernan has undertaken a comprehensive study of one of the failed British companies, Topical Budget, and several cameramen have published their autobiographies. Yet what is still missing is what Pronay began in his article and what Raymond Fielding accomplished for the American industry, a comprehensive study of the British newsreel industry.

<sup>532</sup>Pronay, 114.

<sup>533</sup> Ibid.

<sup>534</sup> Raymond Fielding, *The American Newsreel: A Complete History, 1911-1967* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), 127.

<sup>535</sup> Ibid.

wherever possible, amalgamating faltering foreign companies.<sup>536</sup> In 1929 Charles Pathé sold much of his vast film company to American interests.<sup>537</sup> By the end of the Second World War all of the major British newsreel companies were financially and technically allied with an American studio: British Movietone with Fox Movietone, British Paramount with Paramount Pictures, Pathé with Warner Brothers, and Gaumont-British with Universal.<sup>538</sup> This meant that the stories that headquarters believed to be of interest to American audiences often dominated the content of foreign news stories in Britain.<sup>539</sup> The parent company in the U.S. dispatched or hired cameramen around the globe and assigned stories to them, thereby choosing which stories would be covered and included in central film banks shared by all of the local and international offices and from which all of the footage for programs was drawn by local editors.

While the BBFC censored feature-length projects, no such central committee monitored newsreels, even though their distribution was as widespread as their feature-length counterparts. Such an undertaking would have been overwhelming. With four different companies releasing weekly programmes—not to mention monthly releases by cinemagazines like *The March of Time*—keeping up with the constant turnover of subjects and treatments would have been a massive undertaking. This meant that once a newsreel company had footage, British officials had little control over how that footage would be used, even when they tried to intervene.

In fact, it was not until the Second World War and the institution of the Ministry of Information that the government established a systematic form of newsreel censorship,

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<sup>536</sup> Ibid.

<sup>537</sup> Raymond Fielding, *The American Newsreel: A Complete History, 1911-1967* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), 128. See also Pronay, 108.

<sup>538</sup> Fielding, 128.

<sup>539</sup> Ibid, 108.

assigning events to a single, approved cameraman and then distributing this footage amongst the major companies.<sup>540</sup> But this did not mean that British officials did not attempt to censor newsreel material from India earlier. Rather than doing so at the level of scriptwriting and treatments they attempted to monitor what footage left India in the first place. The difficulty in censoring newsreel images and the focus on controlling exports came in part from the diffuse nature of the international newsreel industry.

Local British offices employed British editors who prepared “foreign stories” (that is, films produced in other countries) for their home market.<sup>541</sup> While Pronay argues that the newsreel editor, as opposed to the newspaper journalist “determines *all* of [the] factors of reception” because he controlled what stories were shown and in what order and the length of time devoted to each story and did so in relative isolation from other narratives of the same event, I am, for obvious reasons, inclined to disagree. As I have argued in previous chapters, regardless of how prescriptive any given film appears to be, audiences interpret films in ways consistent with their own experiences, values, and social *mentalité*. But British newsreel editors were, in fact, their own kind of audience. They took films whose cameramen and subjects likely imagined as having one indelible, consistent meaning and reinterpreted them through film editing, intertitles, and voiceovers—what film scholar Bill Nicholas has called in another context the “voice-of-God”—in ways they believed to be consistent with British audiences’ expectations and values.<sup>542</sup>

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<sup>540</sup> Ibid, 116.

<sup>541</sup> Pronay, 112.

<sup>542</sup> Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 167. Which Nichols was writing about a different genre, his analysis of expository documentaries has much in common with these newsreels. Nichols argues that in expository documentaries, images take a backseat to the powerful voiceover. As audiences, “We take our cue from the commentary and understand the images as evidence or illustration for what is said.” This commentary is made more powerful because of its

### “Notorious Agitator”

In March 1922 Pathé boasted to audiences that it presented them with “the only pictures ever taken of the notorious agitator,” Gandhi.<sup>543</sup> The reel began with long, panning shots of a large crowd gathered on an esplanade, then cut to a mid-range shot of Gandhi, surrounded by his compatriots, dressed all in white, seated on a raised platform. He rises and addresses the crowd, though the silent film was unable to record his speech. From another angle we see him leaving the meeting place, surrounded by Sikh guards and followed by his unnamed colleagues. At the very end of the film we get a close-up of Gandhi’s face, framed by a background of eager listeners, as he appears to smilingly speak to individuals while completely ignoring the camera.

The only other commentary the reel offered was to inform audiences that Gandhi was “now condemned to six years imprisonment,” giving no explanation as to his offense nor any other information on his political program. Without being able to hear his speech and without any other guiding information, the audience, who may have been introduced to Gandhi for the first time in this reel, would only have known that he was an Indian leader who managed to draw great crowds to his speeches and was apparently up to no good.<sup>544</sup>

The imprisonment mentioned in the reel came as a result of Gandhi’s noncooperation movement. After carefully weighing their decision, the Dehli government decided to arrest Gandhi for sedition after protestors at Chauri Chaura killed

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reliance on “the cultivation of the professionally trained, richly toned male voice of commentary,” which reassures audiences that “it has the capacity to judge actions in the historical world without being caught up in them.”

<sup>543</sup> “Gandhi,” *Pathé Gazette*, 30 March 1922.

<sup>544</sup> The footage from this film would again be used Pathé’s retrospective reel at the end of 1922. The film was much truncated in order to fit in the rest of the program and no other information on the events surrounding Gandhi’s arrest was provided. The intertitle for the segment read simply, “Gandhi—notorious agitator imprisoned.” See “Look Back on 1922,” *Pathé Gazette*, 28 December 1922.



some twenty police officers after officers fired on the crowd.<sup>545</sup> Cautious about making the popular, charismatic leader a martyr, the government decided that the Chauri Chaura event gave them enough leverage to arrest Gandhi without raising an untenable level of protest.<sup>546</sup> What Pathé could not have known at the time was that while Gandhi was sentenced to “six years imprisonment,” he would serve less than two; when he underwent an emergency appendectomy in January 1924, the government chose to release him rather than risk his dying under their watch.

Not yet a staple character in the still-emerging form, Gandhi’s subsequent disappearance from British newsreels until 1931 may not have troubled British audiences. None of the British companies chose to cover any aspects of his imprisonment, his illness while imprisoned, or his early release in 1924. The reel from 1922 seems, however, to assume a level of knowledge about Gandhi derived from extradiegetic sources—it identifies him in a way that suggests audience should already understand his notoriety and fails to identify the reason for his arrest—though Pronay’s argument about the centrality of newsreels in disseminating information to large segments of the population suggests that Pathé may have been misguided in its assumptions. While Gandhi may have been absent from British newsreel screens in this period, as I will show, the nationalist movement in India was not. How, then, can we explain the absence of one of its most charismatic leaders?

First, and perhaps most obviously, Gandhi’s imprisonment made him relatively inaccessible to newsreel cameramen from March 1922 until January 1924. An unintended, though likely welcome, consequence of that imprisonment for British

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<sup>545</sup> For a discussion of this event and the role of Gandhi’s image see Amin, “Gandhi as Mahatma.”

<sup>546</sup> Brown, 234.

officials was that it kept Gandhi, an increasingly popular figure, out of the international public eye during that period. Officials had long been hesitant to arrest Gandhi for fear of making him a martyr, but by keeping him under lock and key they had successfully kept him from becoming an international spokesperson for the independence movement in 1922.

Even if, however, his jailers had allowed the newsreel press access to Gandhi between 1922 and 1924, it seems unlikely that Gandhi would have accepted offers for interviews. Gandhi told friends and associates that Yeravda suited him well, giving him time for reflection and study and allowing him the luxury of “isolation and silence” after a year of almost constant travel and public appearances.<sup>547</sup> Distressed by the violent turn noncooperation had taken, most notably at Chauri Chaura, and disappointed that noncooperation had not quickly brought about *swaraj* as he had estimated at the start of 1921, Gandhi, according to biographer Judith Brown, found his isolation from public life while in jail to be a great relief.<sup>548</sup>

It also seems altogether likely that even if both Indian officials and Gandhi had consented to interviews with the newsreel press, American-based companies would have been little interested in the daily activities of the imprisoned leader. Historian Manoranjan Jha argues that 1921-1922 was a high-point in American interest in India, corresponding with what Jha has identified as “the rise of Gandhi in India.”<sup>549</sup> Gandhi piqued American public interest to such an extent that L.F. Rushbrook Williams, Director of Central Bureau of Information of the Government of India later commented,

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<sup>547</sup> Brown, 161-181.

<sup>548</sup> Ibid.

<sup>549</sup> Manoranjan Jha, *Civil Disobedience and After: The American Reaction to Political Developments in India During 1930-1935* (Meerut: Meenakshi Prakashan, 1973), 25.

...the attention attracted by Mr Gandhi, due to the picturesque nature of his activities and his personal idealism, became a distinct factor in the relationship between Britain and certain other countries—notably America.<sup>550</sup>

But according to Jha this interest diminished significantly (if only momentarily) with the suspension of the dramatic Non-Cooperation Movement in March 1922.<sup>551</sup> Employing a cameraman to hunt down images of the embattled figure would have cost the studios dearly, and if American audiences, the bread and butter of newsreel agencies' profits, were not especially interested in Gandhi at the moment, the costs were clearly too dear to waste time trying to convince Gandhi and his jailers to allow them access for filming.

While Gandhi did not appear in early 1920s coverage of the Indian independence movement, he was a constant presence in official debates around newsreels about India. Officials attempted to censor images of the independence movement, not at the level of distribution, as the BBFC was designed to do, but by controlling the export of such images, a line similar to the one taken for print coverage.<sup>552</sup> This form of censorship proved ineffective for two reasons. First, it failed to account for cameramen's ingenuity and dogged determination to get their films back to the home offices in the US. Second, it underestimated the level of hostility on the part of American newsreel agencies, the American government, and the American public that such blatant censorship would inspire.

One particular example demonstrates the extent to which such forms of censorship fail to keep images of the independence movement from reaching screens but also how British editors could intervene to reinterpret these images for British audiences in ways that brought them back in line with official stories of the empire as a national

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<sup>550</sup> Quoted in Jha, 26

<sup>551</sup> Jha, 26-7.

<sup>552</sup> Jha, 116-117.

duty. In 1930 Louis de Rochemont, later founder of *The March of Time* but then working for Fox Movietone, found himself in Bombay during protests against the Salt Tax. The consummate cameraman, Rochemont captured the events on film. Rochemont anticipated that British officials would take steps to ensure that his footage never left the country. So when British officials arrived at his hotel room later that night, demanding that he turn over his reels, Rochemont “had already switched the labels on the film cans; the riot footage was now in a can purporting to contain scenes of the annual Punah festival celebration.”<sup>553</sup> Feigning tears, he handed over the ersatz footage, but the moment the officer left his room, Rochemont set to work getting the reels back to the United States. He managed to find an American nurse who desperately needed help buying a passage home. Rochemont offered her an exchange. If she would get his film safely to Fox Movietone headquarters in New York City, he would pay for her passage back to the States. She readily agreed.<sup>554</sup>

Rochemont cabled ahead to his boss at Fox to prepare him for the footage en route to their offices. But in a twist of fate, Rochemont’s cable never arrived. Films of Indian festivals were a dime-a-dozen in the U.S. newsreel industry, and his canister was quickly shelved. When Rochemont arrived in New York weeks later, his first question was, “What in the hell happened to my riot film?” Of course, Fox quickly retrieved the reels from storage and released the film around the world. In June, the first newsreel using Rochemont appeared on American screens at the end of June, 1930 under the title

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<sup>553</sup> Story recounted in Raymond Fielding, *The March of Time, 1935-1951* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 32.

<sup>554</sup> *Ibid.*

“Political Unrest in India.”<sup>555</sup> The British version hit screens on September 8, 1930 under the title “Turbulent Scenes of Bombay Riots.”<sup>556</sup>

What Rochemont likely found shocking enough to capture on film and what inspired Movietone to release the film so quickly was the aggression police showed towards demonstrators. The film shows officers beating back crowds with sticks as protestors dive out of the way and scatter. A white policeman clearly taunts crowds from the back of a police wagon carrying arrested demonstrators, mockingly throwing salutes at the throngs being all but mowed down by his car. An Indian officer continues to rain blows on a protestor holding the Congress Party flag, even as the man flees, covering his head.

With no centralized system of censorship of completed newsreels, the best officials could do was monitor the export of potentially objectionable films. Rochemont’s films demonstrated how inefficient and ineffective this kind of censorship could be. But Rochemont’s films also demonstrate the extent to which British editors could reshape stock images for the British market. The newsreel using his contraband reels significantly downplayed the violence of the image captured. The opening screen explains,

British Movietone visualizes for you the grave situation which has confronted us in parts of India during recent months. You will marvel at the intimacy of the pictures and appreciate the patience required by European and native police in the face of the utmost difficulty.

Suddenly those night-stick-wielding police are no longer taunting and aggressive bullies but over-worked peacekeepers.

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<sup>555</sup> This film is available in the University of South Carolina’s Moving Image Research Fox Movietone Collection.

<sup>556</sup> “Turbulent Scenes of Bombay Riots,” *British Movietone*, 8 September 1930.

British Movietone was adamant that they did not wish to demonize all Indians. The film was intended “to help the public to an understanding of the difficult problems involved in Gandhi’s civil disobedience campaign,” but certainly not all Indians participated in civil disobedience. Movietone explained that “it should be remembered, if a sense of perspective is to be retained, that India comprises 320-million inhabitants of whom the insurgences number a very small proportion.” Two days later Movietone released more images from Rochemont’s reels. This time the police were ‘forced’ to “charge [the] mob in Bombay streets” when Indians “attempt[ed] to hold a forbidden parade,” an offense that, at least according to the editor’s assessment in the intertitles, justified the “many casualties” at the hands of police.<sup>557</sup> No wonder that, as I will show, officials seem to have been far more concerned with how images of Indian independence would be received in the U.S. than how they would be received in Britain. British editors were infinitely capable of reworking images in order to uphold the imperial order. As I will show later, however, officials could not always count on them to do so.

The British editions of Rochemont’s films highlight a trend in newsreels about India until 1931; whenever editors used image of protests in India they immediately attributed these events to Gandhi’s invisible hand. If officials were determined “to keep the passions of independence out of the film medium,” they were relatively unsuccessful.<sup>558</sup> At least 15 British newsreels between 1922 and 1930 addressed the subject of the independence movement, though only two featured Gandhi himself. Still for British editors Gandhi’s name became shorthand for civil disobedience, the Congress Party, and the fight for Indian independence. Throughout the 1920s newsreel coverage

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<sup>557</sup> “New Pictures of Bombay Riots, Police Charge Mobs,” *British Movietone News* 22 September 1930.

<sup>558</sup> Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, 123

painted him as the “notorious agitator” behind every instance of Indian civil disobedience, an invisible but powerful, omnipresent villain in India.

In fact British editors in the 1920s painted all protesting Indians as blindly devoted to Gandhi and driven to madness by this allegiance. In 1923 Gaumont gawked at what they identified as “India’s Martyrdom,” and were aghast at the idea that “millions of natives” would be “engaged in a peaceful rebellion against the constituted authorities.”<sup>559</sup> As the police meted out beatings on Indian resisters identified as “devoted followers of Mahatma Gandhi [who] take the oath of non-violence against the government,” Gaumont expressed disdain for “their fanatic faith.” Gaumont questioned the sincerity of the movement’s claims to nonviolence, showing scenes of protestors pushing back against armed guards, labeling the scene “an imitation of a peaceful riot.” In all of these scenes Indian, not white, police beat back the crowds. Gaumont was even quick to point out that they used an Indian tool, the *lathi*, to police the crowds. Rochemont’s 1930 films are the only ones I have found that show white police striking Indian protestors. Gandhi’s movement was depicted as an indigenous Indian problem that would be solved by loyal Indian supporters once Gandhi’s followers could be convinced to turn away from their villainous leader. In this light it seems possible that Gandhi appeared in so few newsreels of India because any such films would have been confiscated by the Anglo-Indian authorities.

Newsreel agencies once again turned their attention to Gandhi in 1931 with his salt march to Dandi in protest of the Salt Tax passed earlier that year. Gandhi’s purposeful accessibility to the cameras coupled with an increasing interest on the part of the American public (and therefore the American newsreel agencies) marked a brief spike

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<sup>559</sup> “Pictures of India’s Martyrdom,” *Gaumont Graphic*, 11 April 1923.

in British newsreel stories about Gandhi. Jha argues that the American print press saw the flouting of the salt laws as “the Boston Tea Party in reverse”—drawing water from the sea in to make salt in protest of the government’s heavy taxes—a compelling image for American audiences.<sup>560</sup>

By 1930 Gandhi had realized the importance of gaining American support and utilizing American sympathy to further his campaigns. The day before his march to Dandi Gandhi sent an open letter to the American people that was published in the *New York Times*. Gandhi used the American press to ask for a “concrete expression of public opinion in favor of India’s inherent right to independence.”<sup>561</sup> It seems likely, therefore, that in spite of Peden’s remonstrations Gandhi (or one of his compatriots) alerted the newsreel press to his plans as images of the march from its first steps through the collection of water on the shores of Dandi appear in newsreel collections.

Even as Gandhi attempted to garner a measure of control over his image in the British press by alerting the media to his protest, British editors reinterpreted images of him in ways that clouded his message. Rather than describing the scenes as a communal protest against British rule, British newsreels used the films to paint the Salt March as an odd political field trip to the sea with no discernible motive. Salt march films dominated British newsreel coverage of the Indian independence movement in the first half of 1930. Gaumont, for example, produced three different newsreels of Indian salt marches.<sup>562</sup> Of these Gandhi appeared in one.

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<sup>560</sup> Jha, 222.

<sup>561</sup> “Gandhi Asks Backing Here,” *New York Times* 7 April 1930, 11.

<sup>562</sup> “Gandhi Starts Civil Disobedience Campaign,” *Gaumont British News*, 1 January 1930; “Indian Protestors in Bombay Call for Complete Independence from Britain,” *Gaumont British News*, 1 January 1930; “Bombay Demonstrations Begin Gandhi Campaign of Civil Disobedience,” *Gaumont British News*, 1 January 1930.



In all three, however, Gaumont portrayed Gandhi as the puppet-master. They described one of the marches at which he was not present as “the Gandhi campaign” and divorced the images from a contextualization of the political statement behind these demonstrations. Gaumont described “rebels...who march to the coast for supplies of seawater.” For viewers who knew nothing of the rationale behind defying the government’s salt monopolies, these protestors might have seemed to be maniacally carrying buckets of water from the sea, all at the behest of an invisible but manipulative leader.<sup>563</sup>

### **“Gandhi is—Here!”**

If Gandhi was often a phantom in 1920s newsreel coverage, in the 1930s he became a regular figure in British newsreel coverage, appearing in no less than twenty newsreels.<sup>564</sup> The influx that began in 1930 with the salt march continued through September 1931 as he prepared to depart for the Round Table Conference in London. The film Peden was likely describing in the quote at the beginning of this chapter appeared during the lead-up to Gandhi’s trip to London, a film used by at least three different newsreel agencies.<sup>565</sup> This was a time in which Gandhi’s interest in using the newsreel medium for promotion coalesced with British and American interest in the Indian independence movement.

The reel demonstrates how American and British newsreels relied on the same footage to interpret Gandhi’s image in drastically different ways for American and British

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<sup>563</sup> “Bombay Demonstrations Begin Gandhi Campaign of Civil Disobedience,” *Gaumont British News*, 1 January 1930.

<sup>564</sup> While this number reflects only a small percentage of the thousands of newsreels produced during the decade, it represents a relatively sizeable number for any one figure. By way of comparison, in the same period Ramsay MacDonald, Prime Minister from 1929 to 1935, appeared in 62 newsreels.

<sup>565</sup> British Movietone, Fox Movietone, and Hearst Metrotone all used the same footage. The footage would also be resued repeatedly over the next 15 years whenever companies wanted a reel with an interview since this seems to have been the only full-length interview Gandhi ever gave before the newsreel cameras.

audiences. For example, British audiences saw the film under the title “Gandhi is Persuaded to Talk,” while Hearst Metrotone audiences in the US saw the same film as “Mahatma Gandhi makes first talkie for Metrotone” and American Movietone audiences saw it as “Mahatma Gandhi Talks.”<sup>566</sup>

The British version of the reel opened with the title card and with this description: “Movietone is present at an interview given by the Indian leader to a representative of the American press.” Movietone’s narrative revolved around an image of an unwilling Gandhi having been successfully ambushed by cameramen while giving an already-scheduled interview to an American journalist. The narrator explained, “Our associates, Fox Movietone News, surprised Gandhi giving an interview to an American press correspondent and were able to record the following questions and answers.” British Movietone described a Gandhi on the defensive, “In retreat in the village of Bosgad [sic], the nationalist leader sits and plays for the Hindu-Moslem settlement which will substantiate this claim to represent India.” The British version recorded the answers to six questions: When do you expect to leave for the Round Table Conference? If Britain “grants your demands” do you intend to have absolute prohibition in India? Do you intend to abolish child marriages? If Britain does not grant your demands are you prepared to go back to jail? Would you be prepared to die for Indian independence? If you go to the Round Table Conference would you wear “native Indian dress” or “European dress?” What would you wear if invited to dinner at Buckingham Palace?

Based on British Movietone’s descriptions Gandhi seems aloof and disinterested during

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<sup>566</sup> “Gandhi is Persuaded to Talk,” *British Movietone News*, 1 June 1931; “Mahatma Gandhi Makes First Talk for Metrotone,” *Hearst Metrotone News*, May 1931; “Mahatma Gandhi Talks,” *Fox Movietone News*, 7 October 1946. It should be noted that the dates associated with archival newsreels are often nonsensical. For more information see Appendix 2.

the interview, opening and reading mail, never making eye contact with his interviewer, answering many questions curtly and completely refusing to answer at least one.<sup>567</sup>

Fox Movietone edited the film very differently for American audiences. Where British Movietone attempted to explain the poor sound recording and Gandhi's demeanor as a reflection of his agitation about having to speak via the newsreel camera, Fox Movietone cast it as a function of his innate shyness. The reel opens with the title card—"Mahatma Gandhi Talks"—and then boasting that "Fox Movietone brings to you the first talking picture ever made by India's famous leader..." The reel then opens with a short "making of the newsreel" skit. Two men—one presumably the cameraman (perhaps even Peden himself), the other presumably the interviewer—greet each other at the gates of a compound. They exchange pleasantries and the cameraman asks, "Hey, look, how do you think the chance is, is there any chance of getting a little talking picture of him [Gandhi]?" The interviewer is dubious, explaining that Gandhi is very shy—"Well, Mr. Gandhi is one of the most difficult subjects in the world for a talkie. He has a very feeble voice and moreover he has a very deep prejudice against being photographed at all."<sup>568</sup> The two banter back and forth for a bit; the cameraman laments having traveled "11,000 miles" from New York through the Indian heat to film such a reluctant subject. The cameraman seems altogether undeterred by the interviewer's misgivings about Gandhi as a film subject, instructing his assistants to unload the cart, telling them, "We've gotta get busy on this stuff."

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<sup>567</sup> When asked, "Would you be prepared to die in the cause of India's independence?" he replied only, "It is a bad question."

<sup>568</sup> It seems altogether likely that this bit was included in order to explain to audiences the poor quality of the interview film that followed. Gandhi's voice is, at times, almost inaudible, but whether this is a function of his being shy and soft-spoken or of poor recording on Movietone's part is unclear. The film is very dark, having clearly been filmed indoors.

The cameraman's tenacity, we learn, has paid off. In the next shot we see Gandhi entering a building, presumably the one in which the interview is to be conducted, then Gandhi and the interviewer seated on the floor together. While the British version of the reel was under two minutes, in the Fox version the interview alone receives more than six minutes of footage. In the extended version Gandhi expresses gratitude for his American supporters: "I appreciate all that America has done during the struggle for us, and I hope that we shall be able to retain the goodwill of America through the end of the struggle." All of the same questions in the British version are included in the Fox version, but American audiences heard Gandhi's response to six other questions: Do you plan to do away with the caste system, "which makes virtual outcasts of India's so-called 60 millions of untouchables?" Have you sent with Lord Irwin any message for the British prime minister? Do you expect that Britain will give India full self-government at this time? Do you expect full communal peace between Muslims and Hindus in a new Indian state? If England does not grant your demands, what will be your course of action?

On August 29, 1931 Gandhi left India for the Second Round Table Conference to be held in London.<sup>569</sup> Whereas officials in India had been hyper-vigilant (if not always successful) in censoring the export of films of Gandhi, officials in Britain seemed little concerned over the gaggle of cameramen that followed Gandhi's every move in England. On one hand, metropolitan officials had no real channels for censoring this material. On the other hand, as Gandhi's activities were well-monitored during his stay and the films produced in England would most likely be filmed by local British cameramen, British officials likely worried very little about what the cameras might capture. For their part

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<sup>569</sup> James D. Hunt, *Gandhi in London* (Springfield, VA: Nataraj Books, 1993), 176.

British cameramen earned their wages during the Round Table Conference. More reels aired in Britain Gandhi's five month stay than in the entire previous decade.

But in 1931 it was Gandhi, finally recognizing the potential for harnessing the newsreel (or at any rate, recognizing that he was unable to escape them) who shaped his own image at the Round Table Conference. Expecting little to come of the actual conference, Gandhi's main priority was using the opportunity to explain his stance and his actions to the British people in order to garner their empathy for his cause.<sup>570</sup> Gandhi used newsreels coverage in the hopes of endearing himself to British and American audiences.<sup>571</sup> As such he prepared himself to address the British "through whatever means were available," making himself accessible to all sorts of reporters, including newsreel cameramen.

Much of the coverage from the early days of his visit was mocking and derisive. Pathé described his Landing at Folkestone as nothing less than a ridiculous spectacle.<sup>572</sup> The narrator jeered that Gandhi had travelled with "pots and pans, which he declared at customs," and sneered that Gandhi's travelling companion, Miss Slade, had hurried off the boat "to tend to the luggage, that is the goat's milk, etcetera," and gawked at Gandhi bringing his "spinning wheel."<sup>573</sup> The narrator described Gandhi as being "scantly clad, but with an extremely wet blanket around his tiny frame." He surmised, "He must have

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<sup>570</sup> Hunt, 181.

<sup>571</sup> It should be noted, however, that Gandhi did so on his own terms. While he provided more newsreel interviews during this period than during any other period in his life, he did not grant every requested interview. In several reels from this period we see him refusing to speak. In one of Paramount's reels he is so irritated by what seems to be an interviewer goading him into speaking a few words from a train window stopped at a station that he actually covers the interviewer's mouth with his hand, smiling the entire time.

<sup>572</sup> "Gandhi is—here!", *Pathé Gazette*, 14 September 1931.

<sup>573</sup> Madeleine Slade was the daughter of a British admiral who met Gandhi in the early 1920s. In 1925 she joined Gandhi in the Sabarmati Ashram and became his almost constant companion, a decision that made her the butt of jokes in satires of the period. Even as their attitude towards Gandhi softened, editors continued to paint Miss Slade, which is how they always identified her, as something of an oddity—an elite white woman who gave up her position to follow Gandhi and fight for Indian independence.

been frozen. We were, in thick overcoats.” And when he appeared before crowds at the Friend’s Meeting House in London, “they really did see a lot of him, even his knees.” They mocked what they saw as his alleged shyness in front of the cameras even as he beamed at the cameramen following him about London, sniping that they were “sure that he cannot complain of his reception or the publicity he’s received, from which, by the way, we understood he shrank.”<sup>574</sup>

American newsreels used the same footage of Gandhi’s arrival. The U.S. versions showed a similar interest in Gandhi’s clothing, likewise divorcing it from its political symbolism. While they portrayed his dress as an oddity, they also identified it as a sign of humility in spite of what they say was his incredible power. Paramount Sound News poked fun by calling him “the well-dressed Mahatma” but explained that “he’s too busy to change his clothes” because he was charged with “the destiny of 300 million people.”<sup>575</sup> Hearst Metrotone likewise divorced Gandhi’s clothing from the symbolism of its message, describing it simply as Oriental oddity—“a cheap shawl and loin cloth, his native dress.”<sup>576</sup> While both were somewhat mocking (though nothing compared to Pathé), both also envisioned Gandhi as a freedom-fighter for his people.

But as his visit continued it became more difficult it became for British editors to interpret images in ways that painted Gandhi as a threat and a menace. Each time Gandhi appeared in public it seemed, at least according to the newsreels, that crowds of adoring fans gathered. If the crowds that gathered to hear Gandhi’s public speeches in India—crowds that Movietone, at least, labeled “hysterical”—were used to mark him as a villain for British viewers, the European crowds that gathered to cheer Gandhi’s visits forced

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<sup>574</sup> Ibid.

<sup>575</sup> “This Man Gandhi!” *Paramount Sound News*, September 1931.

<sup>576</sup> “Mahatma Gandhi Carries India’s Fight to Europe,” *Hearst Metrotone News*, 11 September 1931.

editors to create an image of him as an unexpected European hero.<sup>577</sup> In Rome and Paris crowds gathered to cheer his arrival and witness his departure.<sup>578</sup> Pathé showed crowds in the East End who gathered to see Charlie Chaplin visit Gandhi at Kingsley Hall. According to the reel they came out “in thousands...to greet the two famous little men, with cries of ‘good old Charlie’ and ‘good old Gandhi!’”<sup>579</sup> British Paramount captured images of Cockney children in full heritage dress greeting Gandhi at the doors of his meeting with the Round Table Conference to present him with oranges.<sup>580</sup> Crowds gathered when Gandhi planted a tree at Kingsley Hall to commemorate his visit.<sup>581</sup>

These gatherings might have been easily dismissed by British audiences and British editors. The Friend’s Meeting House was a gathering spot for London’s Quaker community, one that was known for having especially close ties to London’s Indian community.<sup>582</sup> The Cockney children seem clearly out as part of a publicity stunt. A public Chaplin visit to the East End likely would have drawn crowds whomever he visited. Kingsley Hall was a known gathering place for London pacifists.

Harder to dismiss, however, were the images of Lancashire cotton mill workers who turned out to witness Gandhi’s visit to their city and its cotton mills, which his *satyagraha* campaign was accused of bankrupting. All of the major newsreel companies sent cameramen to cover the event. The companies likely hoped that drama would ensue, a confrontation between the India leader and local interests, an admission of guilt, or perhaps an apology and promise to change his ways.

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<sup>577</sup> “Gandhi Greeted by Hysterical Crowd,” *British Movietone News*, 9 April 1931.

<sup>578</sup> “Gandhi Starts his Homeward Trek,” *British Movietone News*, 7 December 1931; “Gandhi Nearer India,” *British Paramount News*, 17 December 1931.

<sup>579</sup> “Charlie Meets Gandhi,” *Pathé News*, 24 September 1931.

<sup>580</sup> “In the Limelight,” *British Paramount*, 17 September 1931.

<sup>581</sup> “Gandhi Going Home,” *British Paramount*, 17 December 1931.

<sup>582</sup> Lahiri, 58-9.

What newsreel coverage had to juxtapose, in fact, was the contrast between the assumed animosity of mill workers in Lancaster towards Gandhi and the images of mill workers turning out in droves to cheer him. British Paramount showed images of Lancashire's mayor giving a speech addressed to the Indian leader.<sup>583</sup> The mayor told Gandhi that he hoped

that as a result of your visit to Lancashire and the intimate talks you intend to have with the people in the cotton trade there will be a resumption of the happy trade relations which formerly existed between your country and ours and so alleviate the acute distress which is felt in Lancashire at present.<sup>584</sup>

In response, Gandhi simply told the crowds, "I am thankful that I got this opportunity of being surrounded by these happy children and seeing the homes of the poor."<sup>585</sup>

Paramount's narrator announced that Gandhi's visit would for him to confront "the depression caused by the Indian boycott."<sup>586</sup> The newsreels' commentary contrasted with images of smiling, cheerful people who had opened their homes to the India leader, turned out to greet him, and who jostled for a chance to shake his hand or catch his eye. When asked by Movietone's cameraman to say a few words, the crowds cheered at the prospect.<sup>587</sup> According to Lancashire historian John K. Walton, Gandhi's call for Indians to boycott foreign cloth was only partly responsible for the textile town's economic depression in the early 1930s. Hundreds of mills closed, creating vast unemployment in the region. In 1931, one in three cotton workers in Lancashire were unemployed.<sup>588</sup>

Mill workers had turned out in droves to greet Gandhi at the train station and at various town-hall meetings throughout his day-long visit to Lancashire. One of Gandhi's

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<sup>583</sup> "Gandhi in Lancashire," *British Paramount*, 29 September 1931.

<sup>584</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>585</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>586</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>587</sup> "Gandhi in Lancashire Sees for Himself," *British Movietone News*, 28 September 1931.

<sup>588</sup> John K. Walton, *Lancashire: A Social History, 1558-1939* (Wolfeboro, NH: Manchester University Press, 1987).



friends, Anglican priest and Indian National Congress participant C. F. Andrews, had encouraged Gandhi to visit Lancashire during his trip to London. Andrews visited the area himself earlier, and the widespread poverty and unemployment he saw left him questioning the justice of impoverishing British workers with a boycott of British fabric.<sup>589</sup> The workers who cheerfully came out to meet Gandhi might have believed that when he saw the deprivation under which they were living, he too would question the validity of his boycott. Their original enthusiasm might have reflected their earnest hope that by the end of the day the whole thing would be resolved to their liking. This was not to be the case, at least not in the way they had envisioned that morning.

Throughout the day Gandhi consistently expressed sympathy for Lancashire's workers but maintained that the plight of India's workers, with whom he declared his ultimate responsibility lay, was far direr than even that of the unemployed workers before him in Lancashire. Mahadev Desai recalled Gandhi telling the unemployed,

I am pained...at the unemployment here. But here is no starvation or semi-starvation. If you went to the villages of India, you would find utter despair in the eyes of the villagers, you would find half-starved skeletons, living corpses. If India could revive them by putting life and food into them in the shape of work, India would help the world.<sup>590</sup>

If he could save Lancashire and India at the same time, Gandhi assured them he would do so gladly.

Even as it became clear that Gandhi would not call an end to the boycott on the spot, workers' approval for Gandhi seems not to have waned. Rather than souring their opinion of him, the speeches cast him as a hero of the international working class, much as his insistence on staying in the East End had done for his image in London. This

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<sup>589</sup> Homer A. Jack, ed, *The Gandhi Reader: A Sourcebook of His Life and Writings* (New York: Grove Press, 1956), 266.

<sup>590</sup> Quoted in Mahadev Desai, "Excursion to Lancashire" in Jack, *The Gandhi Reader*, 267.

image of Gandhi as a champion of all workers left Lancashire residents cheering for him as heartily at the end of his visit as they had at its start. American journalist Louis Fischer claimed that one of the mill workers left his meeting with Gandhi saying, “I am one of the unemployed, but if I was in India I would say the same thing Mr. Gandhi is saying.”<sup>591</sup>

In fact the longer his visit to England wore on, the more difficult it became for British editors to cast Gandhi as the evil villain at the center of their imperial melodrama. Living up to Peden’s complaints, he rarely spoke to the newsreel cameras. When he did he always expressed fondness for or gratitude to the British. In an interview with Movietone before his departure, he explained that the *satyagraha* campaign was not intended to punish or damage the British. He told the interviewer, “Well, I would like to be able to say that a circle of British friends is never an issue and it could not be otherwise as the *satyagraha* movement is nothing but a movement towards promoting goodwill in those against whom we seem to be fighting.”<sup>592</sup> When asked by a newsreel interviewer at Lancashire if there was anything he wished to tell the crowd, he replied, “You are going to tell the other children that I love you as my own children.” When the reporter incorrectly repeated, “He loves all the children of the world,” Gandhi quickly corrected him, “I love you, all the children, as my *own*,” ensuring that the stress remained on his love for the British.<sup>593</sup> The Movietone editor chose to leave the entire exchange intact. When Paramount came out to cover his planting a tree to commemorate his stay, he told the group that he was “pleased to be among the poor people of the East End.

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<sup>591</sup> Louis Fischer, *The Essential Gandhi: An Anthology of Writings on His Life, Work, and Ideas* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 232.

<sup>592</sup> “Hush-Hush Publicity on Gandhi’s Journey,” *British Movietone News*, 14 September 1931.

<sup>593</sup> Gandhi in Lancashire Sees for Himself,” *British Movietone News*, 28 September 1931.

Whatever the results may be of my visit here, I will take with me the very pleasant memories of my stay with the poor people of London.”<sup>594</sup> And at the dock as he departed London he told the cameras, “I carry with me the pleasantest recollections of many happy friendships formed.”<sup>595</sup> It was difficult to maintain an image of Gandhi as a power hungry menace as Britons flocked around him and he expressed his gratitude for the hospitality he had been shown.

Even as Gandhi exerted more control over his own image in Britain, he was unable to control it completely. Unable to easily paint Gandhi as a villain, editors increasingly portrayed him as a harmless oddity, depoliticizing him as a media figure. Newsreels reinterpreted Gandhi’s image in ways that alienated it from the political and social program he consciously strove to represent.

Coverage in 1931 began a trend that would continue until his death in 1948—focusing attention on Gandhi’s size as a way of highlighting his harmlessness. Newsreels described him as “frail,” “emaciated,” “sphinx-like,” or simply ‘little.’ Sometimes remarks about his size were a quick way of dismissing his cause, demands, and power—“this bizarre little man whose coming has caused so much comment.”<sup>596</sup> At other times commentary contrasted the apparent weakness of his body with the strength of his political importance; much later when Mountbatten invited Gandhi to meet with him in the days after his swearing in as Viceroy, Movietone drew a distinction between his powerful position reflected in the fact that “one of Lord Moutbatten’s first acts was to

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<sup>594</sup> “Gandhi Going Home,” *British Paramount News*, 17 December 1931.

<sup>595</sup> “Gandhi Starts his Homeward Trek,” *British Movietone News*, 7 December 1931.

<sup>596</sup> “Gandhi is—Here!,” *Pathé Gazette*, 1 June 1931.

issue an invitation to Mr. Gandhi” and his physical frailty, showing images of Gandhi “lean[ing] on Lady Mountbatten’s shoulder” as the three walked through the gardens.<sup>597</sup>

Notably newsreels never made a connection between his diminutive stature and his own ideas about using his body as a social and political symbol. When mentioning his size they did not connect it with his practice of fasting for communal- and self-purification. It would not be until 1946 that any of the British newsreel companies would cover one of Gandhi’s fasts, avoiding the topic until it was possible to easily argue to audiences that his, to use one newsreel’s term, “death fasts” were a directed threat at other Indians, not the British.

Even British newspapers did not include photographic images of Gandhi’s fasts.<sup>598</sup> Pratt and Vernon argue that “by denying British audiences the sight of Gandhi’s frail, traditionally clad body opposed to the power of the colonial state, the government and the press denuded the fasts of some of their visceral potency.”<sup>599</sup> Officials in India feared international public response to images of an emaciated Gandhi, especially while he was under their watch in prison in 1932 and 1943, but the fact that at least the 1932 fast took place in prison afforded them a measure of control over what images could be taken and disseminated. Still even without new images British newsreels could have covered the story using archival footage of Gandhi, a commonplace practice. Hearst Metrotone covered Gandhi’s 1932 fast using archival footage from the interview film I described earlier. Newsreels also never connected his size with his daily dietary or

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<sup>597</sup> “Mountbatten Sworn in and Sees Gandhi,” *British Movietone News*, 10 April 1947.

<sup>598</sup> Pratt and Vernon, 103.

<sup>599</sup> *Ibid.*

physical practices, personal practices that Gandhi saw as intimately connected to his public and political pursuits.<sup>600</sup>

Movietone's interviewer, for example, had asked if Gandhi would dress in his *dhoti* if invited to Buckingham Palace. Gandhi responded simply, "in any other dress I should be most discourteous to [the king] because I should be artificial."<sup>601</sup> The film left viewers who knew nothing about *swadeshi* with the image of him dining bare-chested with their monarch. Most newsreels described his dress as his "native costume," detaching it from his conscious choice to dress in "*swadeshi* loin cloth and a shawl in cold weather" in order "to demonstrate *swadeshi* and his identification with the poor of India."<sup>602</sup> Editors divorced his wardrobe from his activism and made them general oddities of imagined Indian culture rather than visual examples of his advocacy.

In a matter of months Gandhi's image in British newsreels transformed from one of maniacal villain to one of an apolitical Indian oddity. Gandhi succeeded in improving his image in newsreels, which could no longer paint him as a hysterical *enfant terrible* when British audiences across the country had seen him as a soft-spoken, smiling man who apparently charmed even the mill workers he was accused of putting out of work. Gandhi successfully cast himself not as an enemy of the British or even the empire but as a proponent of the poor.

Resigned to eliminating him as a de facto villain but not yet prepared to make him a full-fledged hero, editors instead depoliticized Gandhi's image in 1931, side-stepping political debates while capitalizing on him as one of their most attractive stars.

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<sup>600</sup> Joseph S. Alter, *Gandhi's Body: Sex, Diet, and the Politics of Nationalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 7.

<sup>601</sup> "Gandhi is Persuaded to Talk," *British Movietone*, 1 June 1931.

<sup>602</sup> Brown, 161.

Separating him from his political program made him harmless from an imperial standpoint while also quietening any debates this program might have raised about the state of the poor in Britain. Rather than making him interesting as a threat or alternatively a truth-teller, newsreels painted Gandhi as interesting because of his strangeness, a strangeness that precluded him from being frightening or inspiring. Gandhi ended 1931 as “the stormy petrel of the Indian Empire,”<sup>603</sup> a startling figure, and began 1932 as “the extraordinary man who is playing so important a role in his country’s affairs,” affairs that apparently had little to do with those of the British.<sup>604</sup> But in order to maintain his image as an “extraordinary man” who posed no threat to the British, newsreels began to paint him as a figure whose views represented only a small minority of the Indian people.

**“...By No Means Represent the Vast Majority of India’s Millions...”**

Newsreel coverage of India after 1931 had to contend with the amicable image of Gandhi in England while discounting the demands of his movement. Initially editors needed worry little about maintaining this distinction. A week after Gandhi returned from London the Government of India again imprisoned him in connection with a renewed civil disobedience movement. British Paramount covered the night before his arrest but the other British companies avoided it completely.<sup>605</sup> Over the next ten years newsreel coverage of the Indian independence movement echoed coverage from the previous decade, painting it as a movement without a leader. None mentioned Gandhi’s

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<sup>603</sup> “England: Mr. Gandhi Arrives for Round Table Conference,” *British Paramount News*, 15 September 1931.

<sup>604</sup> “Gandhi India Bound,” *British Paramount News*, 10 December 1931.

<sup>605</sup> “Indian Unrest Grows,” *British Paramount News* 21 January 1932.

release from prison or any of his subsequent imprisonments.<sup>606</sup> None covered any of his subsequent fasts even though they were, according to Pratt and Vernon, hot topics in the British print press.<sup>607</sup>

How can we account for the disappearance of one of 1931's greatest newsreel stars? First, as opposed to his time London, the late 1930s and early 1940s marked a noted period in which Gandhi consciously withdrew from the public eye.<sup>608</sup> Gandhi's program no longer needed public support from the British or American people and as such Gandhi no longer sought out the attention of newsreel cameramen as he had in the past. It seems likely, too, that American parent companies withdrew funding for cameramen in India. Jha argues that by 1932 Americans had more or less lost interest in Gandhi, especially with regards to his regular program of fasting.<sup>609</sup>

This downturn in public interest and access to Gandhi actually came at a moment in which officials took even more stringent measures to control images of the Indian nationalist movement. India's forced commitment to the war effort in 1942 was ultimately the deciding factor. Officials were at pains to paint India as a committed imperial ally. As the war progressed even coverage of the independence movement ground to a halt as officials denied export licenses to any film that did not present India as wholeheartedly loyal to the imperial war effort. With the start of the war, more government offices became interested in the image of India being distributed, which greatly limited the kinds of stories that could be told with film footage. But this interest in limiting coverage of the independence movement lay less, as I will show, in

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<sup>606</sup> American agencies, on the other hand, did cover these subjects. See for example "All India Rejoices as Leader Gandhi Quits Prison," *Hearst Metrotone News*, 11 April 1931.

<sup>607</sup> Pratt and Vernon, "Appeal from this fiery bed..." op cit.

<sup>608</sup> See Brown, Chapter 8.

<sup>609</sup> Jha, 222.

controlling British information on India, than in helping to shape American public opinion of the empire.

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s the India Office attempted to guide the direction of newsreel coverage of India, which often seems to have meant taking steps to avoid images of dissent against British rule in India reaching screens, especially American screens. Their attempts were often only marginally successful as they attempted to navigate between outright censorship (and the official backlash that might create) and *laissez-faire* trust that the American newsreel industry would keep their best interests at heart.

When Rochemont's company wanted to dedicate one of their serials to India, for example, the Ministry of Information and the India Office saw it as both a risk and an opportunity. MoI warned that they would not be able to "control [the film's] policy" and would have to accept the possibility that "its reporting might be critical of the British policy on some points."<sup>610</sup> But they hoped that the film might also help Americans "to recognize the difficulty and complexity of the problem" and disrupt the American tendency "to view the whole thing in terms of a saintly Mahatma representing the starved and oppressed masses of India, and of their rich and powerful oppressors."<sup>611</sup> MoI recognized that they would need to proceed with caution. They could not openly "dictate to 'The March of Time' people what subjects they could take or how they should set about their work" but they felt that "the more assistance [the India Office could offer]...the better the result would be."<sup>612</sup>

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<sup>610</sup> Letter to A.H. Joyce from Ministry of Information, 11 May 1940 (India Office Records: "March of Time" Film, IOR/L/I/1/690).

<sup>611</sup> Ibid.

<sup>612</sup> Ibid.



Rather than outright censorship, the India Office tried to guide *The March of Time* in the “right” direction. They drew up a travel program so that *The March of Time* was sure to get all the footage it wanted to make a film about

The types of government in India, i.e. the native princes and their courts, the district magistrates, and the Congress, the Muslim League, etcetera. A village community, and the chief cities. The Viceroy, the army. The outstanding personalities, the natural resources, etcetera, in fact, as much of the Indian scene as we can film, including India’s war effort.<sup>613</sup>

The India Office apparently intended to let them film scenes about “the Congress” and “the Muslim League” even though this would likely lead to discussions of the independence movement. Of course, all of this filming would have to happen under the guidance of government appointed tour guides, who would make sure *The March of Time* cameramen returned home with “appropriate” images to use in their film.

The India Office hoped this guidance would circumvent problems with some concerns raised by *The March of Time*’s London office. One of their employees, D.J. Vaidya, who one intelligence official labeled “a thoroughly poisonous young communist,” had apparently introduced H. Maurice Lancaster—the Director of Production for the London Office, who planned to accompany the film unit—to Indian activists Krishna Menon and Bhicoo Ballivala as points of contact who could provide the company with access to the Congress Party in India.<sup>614</sup> The intelligence officer was fairly confident that Lancaster knew “nothing of the backgrounds of MENON or Vaidya” and was therefore harmless himself.<sup>615</sup> But this apparent naiveté meant that the officer felt it “wise to take some precautions to see that he does not fall into the wrong hands in

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<sup>613</sup> Letter from Rita Andre to A.H. Joyce, 1940 (India Office Records: “March of Time” Film, IOR/L/I/1/690).

<sup>614</sup> Letter to Mr. Silver, 13 January 1941 (India Office Records: “March of Time” Film, IOR/L/I/1/690).

<sup>615</sup> Ibid.

India.”<sup>616</sup> Head of the Information and Broadcasting Department for the Government of India, Sir Frederick Puckle, told Director of Information at the India Office, A. H. Joyce, that he believed that by lending support with “all possible advice and facilities,” they could discourage Lancaster from forming to close a bond with any Congress representatives.<sup>617</sup> As long as they kept him on the straight and narrow while filming, *The March of Time* piece could not help but make American audiences more sympathetic to Britain’s work in India.

But if the India Office might maintain some control over the shooting of the film, they would be powerless over the editing of the film. At *The March of Time*’s request—and because the British Ambassador’s office advised the India Office that doing otherwise would inevitably cause a diplomatic stir—the India Office granted permission for the raw footage to be sent sight unseen back to the States. But they required that the film should be edited under the guidance of the British ambassador to Washington. N.M. Butler, Information Officer at the embassy in Washington, assured Joyce that he would do his best in guiding the edits and thought that the film was

of great importance, the more so since the [recent Nazi occupation of] Greece have had a damping [sic] effect on American public opinion. Evidence that so vast a land as India is actively engaged in war effort both in the matter of men and material would be most helpful.<sup>618</sup>

With such promises, the Government of India consigned the raw film to the embassy and *The March of Time*’s American editors.

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<sup>616</sup> Telegram from Puckle to A.H. Joyce, 1941(India Office Records: “March of Time” Film, IOR/L/I/1/690).

<sup>617</sup> Ibid.

<sup>618</sup> Letter from N.M. Butler to A.H. Joyce, 25 April 1941 (India Office Records: “March of Time” Film, IOR/L/I/1/690).

*The March of Time* arranged to give India Office staff a private screening of the film before its release. This seems, however, to have been a matter of keeping up appearances. After watching the film, Joyce expressed concern that the “sentence at end of commentary referring to the ‘freedom that has been denied to her’ does not do justice to the facts.”<sup>619</sup> He suggested something more along the lines of “freedom that has so far eluded them” or “that they have so long desired.”<sup>620</sup>

The British Ambassador to Washington, Edward Frederick Lindley Wood, was noncommittal about what could be done.<sup>621</sup> According to Wood, Rochemont might be willing to revise the film before its British release but only if the company had not already made too many prints for the market. As for the American market, the company had already begun to release the film for showing. At any rate, Wood seemed satisfied with the work he had personally done in supervising the edits and claimed that he had literally written large portions of the script.<sup>622</sup> He did not foresee the film having any negative effect on American public opinion, though his colleagues in the India Office seemed unsure that it was the promotional piece for which they had hoped.

Perhaps not surprisingly, *The March of Time* made no changes to the script before they released the film in Britain in 1942. The questionable line did not escape notice. Physics professor at University College London, G. Burniston Brown, expressed his frustration with the implications of that line in a letter to *The Times* the same month the film was released:

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<sup>619</sup> Telegram from A.H. Joyce to British Embassy, 19 June 1942 (India Office Records: “March of Time” Film, IOR/L/I/1/690).

<sup>620</sup> Ibid.

<sup>621</sup> Interestingly, Wood had had served as Viceroy of India as Lord Irwin from April 1926 until April 1931 and had been cosignatory on the Gandhi-Irwin Pact.

<sup>622</sup> Telegram from Hennessey to A.H. Joyce, 30 June 1942 (India Office Records: “March of Time” Film, IOR/L/I/1/690).

A recent “March of Time” film entitled “India No. 2” shows glimpses of various sections of the Indian war effort. Then it concludes with these words or words to this effect:--“These workers are working for the freedom and self-government which they have so long desired and which they have been denied.” I doubt whether Dr. Goebbels himself could produce anything more subtly misleading and anti-British and yet this is passed for exhibition all over the world!<sup>623</sup>

The India Office whole-heartedly sympathized with Brown’s concerns but felt its hands were tied. Not only had they been unable to sway Rochemont or even Wood to seek the change in wording, Joyce felt that he could not even take the opportunity to publicly explain the work his office had done to get the script rewritten. In a letter to R.W. Brock at the Ministry of Information Joyce lamented,

Were it not for the fact that any public explanation of our attempt to put matters right would be calculated to upset relations with “March of Time”, I should have felt tempted to have asked the Times to publish a letter indicating that we did our best to get the matter put right.<sup>624</sup>

Brock, too was frustrated and expressed “hope [that] MoI will protest March of Time.”<sup>625</sup> This never happened.

In the end Joyce feared upsetting *The March of Time*, a production company whose influence was great enough that he had hoped it could sway American opinion on their behalf. He seems to have been utterly unconcerned about what such a line might do to British public opinion on the empire. In the case of ‘India in Crisis,’ it seems clear that both the India Office and the Government of India were far more concerned about maintaining diplomatic relations with the US than demanding more officially palatable newsreels for the British market. In so doing, however, they relinquished control over

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<sup>623</sup> Clipping from *The Times*, 13 November 1942 (India Office Records: “March of Time” Film, IOR/L/I/1/690).

<sup>624</sup> Letter from A.H. Joyce to R.W. Brock, 13 November 1942 (India Office Records: “March of Time” Film, IOR/L/I/1/690).

<sup>625</sup> *Ibid.*

how Indian independence was envisioned not only in American newsreels but also in British ones.

Coverage of India's independence movement became increasingly sporadic as Britain became enmeshed in the Second World War. The war meant that more and more officials came to weigh in on how the image of India would affect the war effort and the international image of the British and the Empire. Historian Wendy Webster argues that "Images of loyalty became especially important in the context of the 1942 Quit India Movement," and that representations of India came to focus more and more heavily on images of Indians serving the war effort in order to elide the growing strength of the Indian nationalist movement.<sup>626</sup> Just as Gandhi faded from newsreels in 1932, forcing newsreels to cover the Indian nationalist movement without footage of its most famous star, by 1942 British newsreel editors rarely received any material with which to cover the nationalist movement at all, receiving only footage of India's contribution to the war.

With the start of the war in India, the India Office and the Government of India quickly formed a partnership with the War Office and the Government of India's Defense Department in trying to shape the coverage of India in newsreels. Each had very different ideas what the image of India should be. As newsreel interest turned to using the Indian war effort as a way of painting global support for the Allied war effort, officials tried to find ways to harness this powerful tool. The reestablishment of the Ministry of Information in 1939 afforded officials the first opportunity for outright censorship of newsreel material released in Britain and "every frame of film had to be submitted to examination and every word in every script vetted."<sup>627</sup> In addition, the MoI

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<sup>626</sup> Wendy Webster, *Englishness and Empire, 1939-1965* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 32.

<sup>627</sup> Pronay, 116.

assigned one company's cameraman to each event and region; each company was expected to share their approved footage with the others in order that all of the major companies could cover all events, though using the same films.<sup>628</sup>

The War Office and the Government of India Defense Department also came together to set up camera units within the British Army in India and offered this footage to the commercial industry, hoping to gain a measure of control over this publicity. In April 1943, for example, the War Office decided to utilize a Major Bryce and Captain C.F. Keene of the British Army for shooting films to be used for government productions and also offered to commercial newsreel companies in order to encourage reporting on the war in India.<sup>629</sup> Many companies seem to have passed over these offers. In 1943 the Ministry of Information estimated that 5000 ft of film came out of India each month but had to admit that "the great bulk of this is not official material."<sup>630</sup>

In January 1943 Paramount seemed to have the most prolific cameraman working in India, and neither the Government of India nor the Ministry of Information had any control over their footage. The Government of India believed that they should, claiming that films shot by Paramount's cameramen were part of their official cache since monitored by them and that they should have a say in how they were used. The Ministry of Information saw this as a potential mine field; trying to direct Paramount to turn over

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<sup>628</sup> Pronay, 116. The India Office Records held files on the army's attempts to monitor these cameramen's movements in India, though sadly as of September 2010 this file had gone missing before I could make detailed notes. In essence, however, cameramen were to be, to use a more recently coined term, embedded with units under the auspices of protecting wandering cameramen from harm in a dangerous war zone. The 'lucky' side effect from an official perspective would be that the unit would be responsible for monitoring what these cameramen were actually allowed to see and film and seizing any footage that seemed questionable before it could even leave the area.

<sup>629</sup> Telegram from the Secretary of State for India to the Government of India, War Department, 3 February 1943, (India Office Records, IOR/L/I/1/692, "Films from India).

<sup>630</sup> Ibid.

their materials to the Government of India for official propaganda would inevitably cause a diplomatic setback.

The Government of India and the MoI were frustrated that footage they saw as eminently useful for bolstering the image of the war in India was being shelved indefinitely. Paramount had “been getting so much material...of a more interesting character from Africa that they have not even bothered to print or look at the material received from India.”<sup>631</sup> Neither could do much to solve the problem. As long as Paramount could hold the threat of Washington’s intervention over their heads, neither dared make too many demands on the company. In fact, officials were so dependent on American news companies, that the MoI had taken “steps...to get a showing of this material”—which most likely meant paying Paramount for the use of their raw footage—outside of the normal channels of distribution in Britain, just in the hopes that it might see the light of day. Here, *pace* Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, India did not appear on British (or American) screens *not* because of British censorship but because the American companies simply did not think that it was very interesting. What is impossible to judge is whether they would have found images of Indian independence interesting enough for the American companies to release or if war coverage would have inevitably caused even these to be shelved.

In this case, all parties could at least agree that Paramount’s cameramen were a vital asset, even if they could not come to a consensus on how to best utilize them to their advantage. At times, however, the concerns of officials in Britain and India were altogether at odds. In 1940 when Movietone wanted the opportunity to film the

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<sup>631</sup> Letter from F. Burton-Lear to J.F. Gennings, (India Office Records, IOR/L/I/1/692, “Films from India”).

Ahmednagar internment camp, which was used to hold Germans living in India, they had to request permission from the government to do so. J.W.P. Chidell—UK Trade Commissioner—was uneasy about granting this access. His reservations, according to him, were founded in a “policy...based primarily on the humanitarian grounds that internees should not be exploited in the interests of the public” and “Article 2 of the Geneva Convention of 1929 by which Prisoners of War are ‘at all times to be protected...from public curiosity.’”<sup>632</sup> But Chidell thought it might be best to have a film of the camp “in cold storage” so that it could be used “later if it should become necessary at any time to counter a propaganda campaign misrepresenting the conditions of internment.”<sup>633</sup> In the end Chidell believed the film could prove beneficial and the Government of India had lucked out that Movietone was willing to foot the bill on its production.

Joyce, however, was wholly unconvinced. He expressed his concern about allowing the footage to be shot at all, but in the end was forced to admit that “if the W.O. [War Office] don’t [sic] object there is no basis on which we can found an objection.”<sup>634</sup> By this point it seems that censorship was so diffuse, and so determined to be careful of American diplomatic relations, that no one could decide who should actually have the last word on how newsreels about India should be handled.

At the end of the day Movietone would not have free rein over the film. The Defense Department for the Government of India insisted that before they even gave

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<sup>632</sup> Telegram from Secretary of State to Government of India Defense Department, April 1940 (India Office Records: “Ahmednagar Internment Camp—Request from Movietone to make a News-reel”, IOR/L/PJ/7/3697).

<sup>633</sup> Handwritten note by AH Joyce on Minute Paper by JWP Chiddell, April 1940 (India Office Records: “Ahmednagar Internment Camp—Request from Movietone to make a News-reel”, IOR/L/PJ/7/3697).

<sup>634</sup> Ibid.



Movietone approval to film, the company would have to agree “that [a British] officer is present throughout filming,” that the film would be “subject to War Office censorship before release,” and that the ‘[f]ilm would be processed, edited, and titled in London.”<sup>635</sup> If the U.S. was a military ally, it seems that the government of India was not fully confident that American Movietone editors would approach the subject in a way that flattered the British in India. While the War Office might have anticipated that the American studios were concerned to ensure that the British were not poorly represented in feature films, the War Office could not officially guarantee that the newsreel companies would adhere to the same standards in their newsreels, promoting the British as military allies not denigrating them as bullish imperialists.

When the independence movement did appear in British newsreel coverage in this period voiceovers, quickly assured audiences that faithful Indian soldiers and police represented the majority of Indians, not Indian protestors. As such, they used even the independence movement to establish a sense of imperial unity. The few newsreels released during the war that mentioned Gandhi described him as a charismatic leader but one who did not represent the general feeling in India. Gandhi’s arrest in 1942 for sedition was not filmed, or at least if it was filmed, officials did not allow the film to leave the country. Instead “the first pictures to arrive in England” were of the aftermath of his arrest.<sup>636</sup> Quick action was taken, according to Movietone, notably not by the British but by “Indian troops and police, loyal as ever and symbolic of the determination of India as a whole to back the United Nations.” India, Movietone promised, supported

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<sup>635</sup> Ibid.

<sup>636</sup> “India Checks Mass Disobedience Riots,” *British Movietone*, 3 September 1942.

Britain:

In France, in Libya, and in Burma, Indian troops have given their lives fighting for a cause they know to be just. They represent the spirit of India, not the Congress mob, a mob swayed by the eloquence of their leaders into falsely believing that an India without England would be an India for the Indians. The majority of Indians know that their only chance of real freedom lies in an Allied victory, and they're willing to make sacrifices now as their contribution to this end.

The newsreels portrayed Gandhi as one of the “leaders of civil disobedience,” as an opportunist who tried to take advantage of a moment when India stood “with the Japanese at the very gates of the country,” risking the lives of his countrymen in order to make his demands. Pathé took a similar stance, accusing Gandhi of making use of “hooligans and agitators to press for a mass civil disobedience campaign.”<sup>637</sup>

But Pathé reassured viewers that the mass gatherings of protestors in the film “by no means represent the vast majority of India’s millions. ... The fair-minded people here and in India will see to it that she has her rightful place in the sun.” Gandhi and the Indian nationalists here were not villains so much as shortsighted blowhards, using moment of crisis to continue their calls for independence and attempting to use fear of catastrophe as a bargaining chip. Such newsreels, as I have shown, were few during the war. Once the war came to an end, however, Gandhi returned to British newsreel coverage once again, and once again in new form.

### **“The Mystic, Sainly Mahatma Gandhi”**

Gandhi emerged from the war, at least in British newsreels, as an apolitical peacemaker and sage advisor, an Indian wiseman. By this point officials seem to have abandoned hope of staving the flow of images of Gandhi and the independence movement. Yet during this period newsreel agencies produced fewer reels of India than

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<sup>637</sup> “The Trouble in India,” *Pathé*, 3 September 1942.

at any point in the form's history. With Indian independence more or less inevitable and with Gandhi having more or less distanced himself from Congress, Gandhi had personally dispensed with the need for international media coverage. American companies, more occupied with stories about the U.S. and Europe and perhaps put off by the ever multiplying number of officials who wanted to put their mark on this coverage, withdrew the majority of their cameramen from India soon after the war ended.

Rather than envisioning Gandhi as the driving force behind Indian independence, after 1946 newsreels depicted Indian nationalism as unresolvable factional and Gandhi as the sole figure who rose above the conflict to fight for what was best for all Indians. In 1946, when the Simla Conference convened to discuss Viceroy Wavell's plans for Indian self-government, all of the major companies still had cameramen permanently stationed in the country. Several of the newsreel companies chose to include coverage of the Simla Conference in their programmes; all declared it a failure. Gandhi, however, was painted as the shining star among a cast of back-biting, uncompromising politicians. By this point Gandhi had detached so significantly from Congress politics that while he accepted Wavell's invitation to attend the conference, he did so only with the understanding that he did not represent Congress and would only attend in an advisory capacity.<sup>638</sup>

British newsreels reflected this changing role while never explicitly explaining it to their audiences. While Movietone showed Cripps, Pethick-Lawrence, Jinnah, Maulana Azad, and Nehru arriving at the conference alone, they showed Gandhi "on his way to evening prayer...surrounded by his ardent followers, who total many millions."<sup>639</sup> Suddenly the man who two years before had, according to British newsreels, represented

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<sup>638</sup> Brown, 355.

<sup>639</sup> "Simla Conference Fails," *British Movietone News*, 15 May 1946.

only a small, polarized minority now led millions of devoted followers and would be “a dominating force in all efforts to reach a settlement.” Gaumont British explained that “Mr. Gandhi was there, too, to throw the weight of his experience into the negotiations.”<sup>640</sup> Later that same year they would describe the conference as being simply, “Hindu, Pandit Nehru. Muslim, Ali Jinnah. And the mystic, saintly Mahatma Gandhi.”<sup>641</sup> When Mountbatten was sworn in as Viceroy, Movietone saw it as appropriate that one of his “first acts was to issue an invitation to Mr. Gandhi,” who later “came to the Viceroy’s house for discussions on the unique position in which India now finds herself.”<sup>642</sup> Suddenly Gandhi the agitator was Gandhi the advisor and ally.

While Gandhi undertook over a dozen public fasts before 1946, only in the post-war period did British newsreels cover these hunger strikes. His previous fasts had most often been aimed at the British and undertaken when he was already imprisoned, but after 1946 he targeted his fasts at ending internal Indian conflicts. Because they could easily be painted as being directed at India’s indigenous factionalism, Gandhi’s later fasts were moments in which newsreels could pass India’s problems back on to India and paint Gandhi as the only solution, taking British diplomats out of the equation altogether. Any failure would be, in the end, an Indian failure.

In 1947, Movietone produced a reel about a fast Gandhi undertook in Calcutta in response to post-Partition communal violence between Hindus and Muslims. According to Movietone, he planned to continue the fast “until the fighting in Calcutta was

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<sup>640</sup> “Leaders of the Indian Nationalist Movement Come to Viceregal Lodge for Conference,” *Gaumont British Newsreels*, 16 May 1946.

<sup>641</sup> “Summing Up No. 3,” *Pathé News*, December 1947.

<sup>642</sup> “Mountbatten Sworn in and Sees Gandhi,” *British Movietone News*, 10 April 1947.

stopped.”<sup>643</sup> When “after 73 hours the city was reported as quiet and Gandhi ended his fast,” Movietone declared it “The Miracle of Gandhi.” Gaumont British described it as

Mahatma Gandhi’s latest achievement as the bringer of peace. ... Amid a tremendous demonstration, the Mahatma himself appeared, still weak and ill but strong in spirit as he prepared to address his people. So Gandhi the peacemaker triumphs in his Calcutta mission.<sup>644</sup>

Later they described him as “a great peacemaker, striving, as ever, for the good of his people.” Pathé wondered at the “vast throngs of Indians, Sikhs, and Muslims...moved to demonstration by the fast of Gandhi.”<sup>645</sup> Far from an agitator or unrepresentative of the people, he was “an amazing man of India” who might be the only figure who could “motivate emotional crowds [to] promise... to end communal strife throughout their land, if he will eat and live.”

Gaumont British, however, did not see Gandhi’s fasts as the most effective attempt at solving India’s internal strife. Their reel showed footage of Gandhi with Calcutta’s governor, Sir Frederick Burrows, and General Bucher, Commander-in-Chief of the Eastern Command, painting Gandhi again as a kind of local advisor.<sup>646</sup> Movietone mentioned Gandhi’s fast only in passing: “Mr. Gandhi, who is 77, later spoke of fasting unto death unless rioting ceased.”<sup>647</sup> Movietone saw the real heroes as British troops,

infantrymen of the Yorks and Lancs driving Stewart tanks in a Muslim area, are regarded as a reassuring asset in this tense situation. All of them, these [on the screen] by the way are the Worcesters, continue to do a wonderful job. Far from being attacked, they were very popular and have given great help to the people. What would happen if they weren’t available hardly bears contemplation.

Movietone was unwilling to suggest that a solution for India’s problems could come from anything but British intervention.

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<sup>643</sup> “Calcutta Peace Mission—Gandhi’s Miracle,” *British Movietone News*, 18 September 1947.

<sup>644</sup> “Gandhi Fasts for 73 Hours in Peace Mission for Calcutta,” *British Gaumont News*, 18 September 1947.

<sup>645</sup> “Gandhi Breaks his Fast,” *Pathé News*, 26 January 1948.

<sup>646</sup> “Rioting in Kolkata (formerly Calcutta),” *British Gaumont News*, 11 November 1946.

<sup>647</sup> “Gandhi Visits Riot-Stricken Calcutta,” *British Movietone News*, 3 October 1946.

By the time Indian independence had been assured in 1946, newsreels no longer immediately associated Gandhi with Britain's problems in India. In fact, they came to allude to an amorphous and unnamed group of leaders. They painted these leaders as fickle, power-hungry men with little connection to the Indian public. Pathé all but mocked the challenges that lay ahead for Indian leadership in 1946, calling them, "leaders trained in agitation and revolt" who now "face the task of building the new India for which they had preached."<sup>648</sup> When Partition took a violent turn in Kashmir in October 1947, Pathé described the riots as India's inevitable "birth pains," taking a cold stance to the violence, which they described as a "massacre" and as "the east wistfully saying goodbye to the reign of the British." The implication was clear—for Pathé Indian leaders had too quickly dismissed the power of the Raj in their blind hunt for power.

In their coverage of Indian independence day, Pathé claimed that for "the average Indian his leaders mean little"; only a small group of political elite cared who held power in the country.<sup>649</sup> The end of the war "had not broken down racial hatreds which had smoldered over the centuries" and had not changed the fact that "in India nearly everyone is hungry." Apparently only the strong arm of the Raj had been able to cap the latent tensions inherent in Indian society. In the end Pathé surmised that "Britain has fulfilled her mission" in India. Throughout the coverage of Indian independence and Partition, Gandhi was never named as a factor. Having been raised above the level of politician to Indian father, none laid the blame for 1947 at his feet.

By the time India achieved independence in 1947, however, newsreel companies had apparently lost interest in covering India. In the summer of 1947 Paramount and

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<sup>648</sup> "Review of the Year 1946," *Pathé News*, 30 December 1946.

<sup>649</sup> "India Takes Over," *Pathé News*, 18 August 1947.

Movietone had hired two freelance Indian cameramen to cover the events of August 15. Pathé, British Gaumont, and Universal had no cameramen of their own in the country and had not arranged to use Paramount's or Movietone's footage. According to cameraman John Turner, who the British Newsreel Association eventually hired to cover the events at Mountbatten's request,

Lord Moutbatten, aware that the newsreels were the primary source for Britain and the world to see this all-important event, was appalled at [the newsreel industry's] indifference, seemingly content to leave the story to the Indians, both working for American-financed companies.<sup>650</sup>

Turner's images became the basis for most coverage of Indian independence, partition, Gandhi's assassination and funeral. Turner more or less became Mountbatten's staff cameraman for the next ten months, following him around the country and being dispatched as Mountbatten saw fit.

On one hand, the coverage of the last year of Gandhi's life was one over which the government had significant control thanks to Turner and Mountbatten. Turner not only filmed Mountbatten's diplomatic ventures, he captured massacres in the Punjab, riots in Dehli, and religious ceremonies at Assam.<sup>651</sup> On the other, this period also seems to have marked a low-point of interest in India on the part of the newsreel industry.

While Turner's footage was made available to all the major companies in the U.S. and Britain, very few took advantage of these reels.

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<sup>650</sup> John Turner, *Filming History: The Memoirs of John Turner, Newsreel Cameraman* (British Universities Film and Video Council: London, 2001), 114. Turner's work covered a great part of the newsreel industry's brief lifespan. Hired by Gaumont-British in 1936, Turner was officially employed by Gaumont-British at the time of Gandhi's death and likely contracted out to the British Newsreel Association for the work he did in India. In 1952 he would leave Gaumont for a permanent position with the Newsreel Association where he served as the Royal Rota Cameraman. In the 1960s he left this position for that of Production Manager and News Editor for Pathé News, where he remained until the company closed in 1976.

<sup>651</sup> *Ibid.*

In fact when Gandhi died in 1948, Turner was the only full-time newsreel cameraman employed in India. Turner had already been spending time filming at Birla House in January 1948, covering what would be Gandhi's last fast in response to the post-Partition violence in the Punjab and the daily prayer meetings held in the gardens, even capturing film of Gandhi "sipping a glass of orange juice" at the end of his fast on January 18.<sup>652</sup> With no sense of what was to come, Turner devoted much of his remaining film stock to what he saw as a critical story, Gandhi's latest fast. In fact he had tried to capture the happenings around Birla house to such an extent that by the end of the month he found himself low on film. He discovered that the stock sent to him from London had been stopped up in Karachi. He would have to travel there himself in order to have it released, so he planned to leave Dehli on February 1 in order to combine his trip to Karachi with a stop in Ceylon in order to film the events of their independence day, scheduled for February 4. On his last afternoon in town, he decided to go see a movie. The film was suddenly interrupted by "solemn music" and the raising of the house lights. The cinema manager appeared and informed the audience that the program would be canceled—Gandhi was dead.

Turner remembered the audience's reaction as that of stunned silence, "eerie and very dramatic," though he also remembered his own personal response:

But apart from the dreadful news as such I realised it was dreadful news for me. I had no film with a world story on my doorstep. ... I remember hurrying from the cinema in a panic. My immediate hope was that they would have a lying-in-state for a day, or several days, so I could get to Karachi and back with the film before the funeral.<sup>653</sup>

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<sup>652</sup> Turner, 130.

<sup>653</sup> Turner, 131.



But Turner soon discovered that the funeral would be held the next day and there would be no time to get to Karachi and back before it was all over. It was only thanks to the resourcefulness of Paramount's Indian freelance cameraman, Ved Parkash, that the events of that week were recorded on film at all. The two went door-to-door begging and threatening blackmail for film stock, managing to collect 3000 feet of film by the next morning.<sup>654</sup> Between the two of them they captured the only films of the funeral procession, film that would have to be shared by any company wishing to cover Gandhi's death and funeral with contemporary footage.

If all five British companies had to share the same footage, they put that shared film bank to use with verve, releasing at least eleven newsreels about Gandhi in the week after his death, most of which was spliced together with the 3000 feet of film Turner and Parkash managed to drum up on such short notice. No longer a capricious little instigator, Gandhi became an imperial hero worthy of British mourning.

All four newsreel companies waxed poetic on the life of a man they had only twenty years before vilified with such gusto. According to Movietone he was "the father of India's independence" and "one of the most vital figures of our age" whose "death must have incalculable results."<sup>655</sup> According to Pathé, "Gandhi's nonviolence held in check the threat of civil war. His simple eloquence and aesthetic life earned him the respect of all."<sup>656</sup> And while they were unsure whether "history will name him mystic or astute politician," they confidently proclaimed, "In every age great men are born. Gandhi was one of these." Gaumont British commended him for his "doctrine of communal

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<sup>654</sup> Turner, 133.

<sup>655</sup> "Gandhi Assassinated," *British Movietone News*, 02 February 1948.

<sup>656</sup> "Gandhi Dead," *Pathé News*, 02 February 1948.

peace” which “brought hope and faith to millions in village and city alike.”<sup>657</sup> His “amazing power and influence did much to lessen the troubles which followed independence.” In all he was “a great man who sacrificed all in the cause of brotherhood and peace among his people.”

These elegiac portraits continued throughout the coming weeks of coverage. Pathé, who had been the most critical company while he was alive, described him in their coverage of his funeral as ““the man who symbolized India’s finest aspirations.”<sup>658</sup> In death he had “transformed from a beloved saint into a divinity. . . . Mahatma Gandhi has become immortal. In the rising flames, the spirit of a great man passed to his god.” Later that year when the company summed up the important events of the quarter, their eulogy became even more over-the-top:

Mahatma Gandhi—Oxford graduate, lawyer and politician, leader, prophet, and god. On the banks of the sacred river they built a funeral pyre and there they said farewell to a man who rocked an empire by his faith in peace. . . . And so he passed on, he who had stirred the conscience of the world.<sup>659</sup>

Gaumont British deemed him “the man who symbolized, above all else, the hopes and aspirations of the India he loved.”<sup>660</sup> In their coverage of a memorial at India House in London, Movietone marveled at “the Mahatma’s ascetic life and great achievements [that] transcended race and religion.”<sup>661</sup> He was, in the end, “India’s greatest leader.”

If the crowds that had turned out to hear his speeches in the 1930s were insignificant, newsreels painted the crowds that turned out for his funeral as symbolic of his benevolent power and influence. In 1930 Movietone reassured its viewers that “India comprises 320-million inhabitants of whom [Gandhi’s followers] number a very small

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<sup>657</sup> “Mahatma Gandhi Assassinated,” *Gaumont British News*, 30 January 1948.

<sup>658</sup> “Funeral of Gandhi,” *Pathé News*, 09 February 1948.

<sup>659</sup> “Summing Up No. 7—Reel 1,” *Pathé News*, 1948.

<sup>660</sup> “Millions Mourn Gandhi,” *Gaumont British News*, 09 February 1948.

<sup>661</sup> “London Indians Pay Homage to Gandhi,” *British Movietone News*, 05 February 1948.

proportion.”<sup>662</sup> In 1948 they surmised that he had “perhaps the largest following any man ever had in his own lifetime.”<sup>663</sup> And while the crowds for his funeral number “something over a million people,” it was “only a fraction of the many millions who followed him in his lifetime.”

His funeral was painted with all the drama of the religious festivals that dominated newsreel filler stories in the 1930s. Coverage insisted that Gandhi had long been a saint to the India people, that his death had transformed him into a martyr, and that his funeral had been the celebration of a god. They focused their attention on the minutiae of the funeral service: “planes strewed a saffron shower of petals over the roof,” “friends built mounds of flowers and perfumed spices high in sandalwood logs,” “a million followers passed the flower-bedecked trailer,” “amongst the sandalwood and incense, the little father was committed to the flames.”<sup>664</sup> A few companies chose to show clips of crowds of mourners being beaten back by mounted Indian police. Movietone was the only company that commented, explaining that they jostling of the crowd was part of the mourning process—“however disturbing it may be that these scenes occurred, they are surely understandable. Gandhi was revered as a saint and as a liberator and before all else emotion held sway. .. Gandhi had made his last journey, but for his countless followers, Gandhi was immortal.”<sup>665</sup>

In the end Gandhi was transformed from a thorn in the British side to a spiritual leader who spoke for the hopes and dreams of the entire commonwealth. From an

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<sup>662</sup> “Bombay Boycott Parade,” *British Movietone News*, 10 June 1930.

<sup>663</sup> “Gandhi Assassinated,” *British Movietone News*, 02 February 1948.

<sup>664</sup> “Funeral of Gandhi,” *Pathé News*, 09 February 1948; “Last Rites for Gandhi,” *Pathé News*, 19 February 1948; “Summing Up No. 7—Reel 1,” *Pathé News*, 1948.

<sup>665</sup> “Funeral of Mahatma Gandhi,” *British Movietone News*, 09 February 1948.

editorial perspective this shift came as a result of Gandhi's own campaign to shape his public image in Britain; the more coverage he received in British newsreels the more difficult editors found it to demonize him for British cinema-going audiences.

Yet neither he nor British audiences nor British editors had absolute control over his image and that of the Indian nationalist movement, and as British officials became increasingly concerned about the empire's image on the world stage, concerns about American public opinion far outweighed those about British confidence in their empire. Officials seem to have been convinced that British audiences had long since been sold on the empire, but as Britain entered the Second World War and became increasingly dependent on American support, officials focused on newsreel footage's potential effect on American opinion of Britain by virtue of its empire. Wartime coverage that focused primarily on the united imperial war effort did so not because officials believed that British audiences needed reassurance but because they feared what American editors might do with images of dissent. Their strict monitoring of footage of India overdetermined the kind of coverage India received in Britain during the final, critical years before its independence. By the time Indian independence returned to newsreel coverage it was no longer simply a movement but an inevitable political fact, a transition that editors glossed over by labeling independence as the natural end-game of the Raj. As such by 1948 British newsreels promoted Gandhi, not as the man who single-handedly took down the British empire, but as a kind of British hero.

## Chapter Six Defining Home in British Colonial Home Movies

*“He basks in the privileges of his chosen life: easy living, numerous servants, abundant pleasures (impossible in Europe), anachronistic authority—even the low cost of gasoline.”*

*“He is fed up with his subject, who tortures his conscience and his life. He tries to dismiss him from his mind, to imagine the colony without the colonized.”*

*“It is necessary, then, not only that the home country constitutes the remote and never intimately known idea, but also that this ideal be immutable and sheltered from time...”*  
--Albert Memmi<sup>666</sup>

In the first five chapters of this dissertation I have argued that audience responses to India films suggest subtle shifts away from thinking of India merely as a British colony and towards thinking of India as an independent state. In my first chapter I argued that British audiences desired films that gave a glimpse into what they believed was “real India,” India outside of the colonial order. In my second and third chapters I argued that there was no easy one-to-one correlation between the triumphalist Hollywood depictions of the Raj and British jingoism for the empire. My fourth chapter demonstrated that India films became a site for discussions about the new relationships available in the as yet unrealized post-imperial world. In my previous chapter I argued that British newsreels never consistently envisioned Gandhi or the Indian nationalist movement as a threat to Britain’s place in the world order.

This chapter, however, demonstrates explicitly the uneven nature of these shifts. This chapter explores three home movie collections produced by families living in India between 1920 and 1947. Home movies produced by these British civil servants do not reflect any sense of imaginative shift, any sense that their makers were living on the edge

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<sup>666</sup> Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 57, 66, 61.

of what, for them, would be a personal cataclysm—Indian independence. Depicting their homes and India as a place of structure, order, and peace, home movie makers ignored or silenced any suggestion that change was underway in India.

Scholarship on colonial families draws on and revises the work of postcolonial theorists like Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon, exploring the ways in which colonialism was a mutually constitutive process, creating colonizers and colonized while at the same time creating slippages that blurred the boundaries between these seemingly Manichean categories. Scholars such as Ann Stoler, Sinha, Burton, and McClintock have demonstrated how official attempts at clearly defining racial boundaries helped imperial administrators legitimate their rule while creating categories over which they had little control.<sup>667</sup> Home movies demonstrate how important policing these boundaries remained even in what are personal and intimate portraits of white British family life in India. These films suggest filmmakers eager to demonstrate the successful maintenance of these boundaries, even as contemporary commentators suggested that this was questionable. In so doing these films often erased Indians from their family portraits of India. As personal memorials to British life in India in the twentieth century, they suggest that civil servants wished to remember India as a place of white privilege, the Raj utopian ideal, not a place of radical change.

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<sup>667</sup> See, for example, Ann Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Ann Stoler, *Races and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the Effeminate Bengali in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: University of Manchester Press, 1995); Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

My research focuses on collections of films produced by three families: Roberts/Layard, Kendal/Peyton, and Vernede/Donaldson.<sup>668</sup> Each collection has a single primary filmmaker. In the case of the Layard and Peyton families it was the father/husband: Austin Havelock Layard and Colonel John Hamilton Bernard Peyton. In the case of the Vernede family, the primary filmmaker was Mrs. Vernede's sister, Barbara Donaldson. These three families represent an elite class of whites in India.<sup>669</sup> The Layard family had a long history of work in the empire, holding posts in Ceylon from 1803.<sup>670</sup> Mr. Layard was an employee of the Indian Civil Service and served as the Deputy Commissioner in Delhi from 1932 to 1938.<sup>671</sup> Peyton was a high-ranking officer in the Indian Army.<sup>672</sup> Vernede was a District Officer for nineteen years in Agra, Benares, Jhansi, Meerut, Allahabad, Unao, Garhwal, and Gorakhpur.<sup>673</sup> His wife and

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<sup>668</sup> These collections were held at the British Empire and Commonwealth (BECM) film archive in Bristol, England. I conducted research in the BECM archive in the summers of 2004, 2005, and 2006. The archive has since closed to researchers, and the films have gone into storage in London until they find an appropriate home. Some films have gone to the Imperial War Museum film archive and some are available at [www.imagesofempire.com](http://www.imagesofempire.com). The majority are currently unavailable to researchers.

The Layard family collection is named Roberts, their daughter's married name, as she donated the collection to the archive. The Peyton family collection was named Kendal for Colonel Peyton's nephew who donated the collection to the archive. The Roberts/Layard collection contains 130 minutes of film. The Kendal/Peyton collection contains 520 minutes of film. The Vernde/Donaldson collection contains 240 minutes of film.

I have found little more specific secondary-source information on these families than what I have shared here. Vernede published a book on the subject of India entitled *British Life in India: An Anthology of Humorous and Other Writings Perpetrated by the British in India, 1790-1950 with Some Latitude for Works Published After Independence*, which I have used as part of my analysis. Vernede and Roberts provided tapes for the oral history archive. I have not consulted these in my work here, though this is obviously a line for future research.

<sup>669</sup> Just the fact that these families had access to filmmaking equipment in these years demonstrates their elite status. The cost of such cameras—around \$400 for the camera alone, not considering the cost of film—precluded most families from owning one.

<sup>670</sup> Jo Duffy, "A Prospectus of the Archival Collections Held at the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum," ([http://www.empiremuseum.co.uk/pdf/archives/archives\\_collectionsprospectus.pdf](http://www.empiremuseum.co.uk/pdf/archives/archives_collectionsprospectus.pdf), Last Accessed: 02 February 2011), 49.

<sup>671</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>672</sup> Ibid.

<sup>673</sup> Ibid.

sister-in-law were the daughters of Sir Charles Kendall, who had served as the judge of the Allahabad High Court.<sup>674</sup>

What makes these films such an interesting source is the way in which they show memories consciously being shaped, the active process of choosing what should be remembered and therefore also what should be forgotten. The dear cost of film in this period meant that home movie makers often chose to select and script their subjects carefully so as not to waste film or money. Most could not afford to shoot aimlessly and throw away the scrap later. One of the major differences between home movies and more contemporary home video was the short length of film rolls; amateur filmmakers could only capture a few minutes of film before having to stop and change the reel. Film scholar Fred Camper argues that the “brevity of the roll” may have led amateur filmmakers to pose their subjects and direct their actions both before and during filming.<sup>675</sup>

Home movies were, then, to a large extent, conventionalized. This chapter explores the scripts that governed colonial home movies, how these three filmmakers chose to memorialize their lives in India. They tended to create films of happy families living in lavish compounds, attended to by servants who catered to their every need while maintaining an emotional distance, and living in a land untroubled by social, political, and economic strife. It is a world in which Indians have a limited role. They tend to appear only when their existence augments the family’s status and as bearers of some earlier culture, never in any role of social or political influence. These films envision

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<sup>674</sup>Ibid. I have not found anything to suggest that Sir Charles Kendall’s family was in any way related to Squadron Leader Spencer Kendal, who donated the Peyton family’s films to the archive.

<sup>675</sup> Fred Camper, “Some Notes on the Home Movie,” *Journal of Film and Video* 38, no. 3 (Spring 1986), 11.



India as pristine, untouched, and serene—a blank slate, a place that the British have begun to modernize under their supervision. There is no sense that these filmmakers were living on the edge of what they likely might have considered a personal and professional catastrophe—Indian independence—an event that would bring an end to their charmed lives in India. Instead these films document an India in which white Britons live blissfully serene and stable lives even as the ground was shifting beneath their feet.

### **“Easy Living”**

As is true of most home movies, these filmmakers’ primary focus is their families. Colonial home movies depict families with strictly defined gender roles, thriving children, and bustling but tidy homes. Film scholar Patricia Erens argues that amateur filmmakers often associate family member with particular areas of the home, what she calls “iconographic environments.”<sup>676</sup> These iconographic environments situate family members with regard to one another and with regard to their imagined roles and personalities.

One iconographic environment that Erens finds in her own sources is that of women in gardens: “The women are shown as beautiful, framed against floral backgrounds, posed in passive and seductive postures.”<sup>677</sup> The image of the woman in the garden had long been a motif of the visual arts and literature, evoking voyeurism and visions of raw female sexuality. In these particular home movies, the fact that women are placed in gardens as opposed to sitting rooms or even kitchens has, at least in part, a technological explanation; capturing images with early cameras required strong natural

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<sup>676</sup> Patricia Erens, “The Galler Home Movies: A Case Study,” *Journal of Film and Video* 38, no. 3 (Spring 1986), 18.

<sup>677</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

light and therefore the equipment could not be used inside buildings, including the very “homes” the home movie was supposed to capture.<sup>678</sup> Still the large compounds of colonial India offered a variety of settings in which to film and staging women in flowery garden settings, as opposed to on the verandah or on wide open lawns, was a choice, whether conscious or unconscious. Historian Elizabeth Buettner argues that gardens had a particular meaning in the context of colonial India, arguing that colonial families often planted their gardens along the walls of their compounds. Gardens marked the edge of the controllable home space and the unknowns of the world beyond their walls.<sup>679</sup>

Layard, Peyton, and Donaldson often use this same trope, filming women primarily lounging in outdoor chaises and walking through flower gardens. In one film the Peyton women sit against a background of flowered bushes while reading the newspaper. In another Colonel Peyton sets up a voyeuristic shot of his wife, Everly, watching her through the frame of a bowed rosebush branch as she tenderly inspects her garden, stopping to sniff flowers along the way and supposedly unaware that her husband is filming her. These women’s companions are usually other white women, the family dog, or occasionally an Indian male servant. Women generally acknowledge the camera and their role in the film.

Filming women in these garden spaces, then depicts them as firmly within the safety of the domestic sphere. Framed by neatly trimmed rose bushes, with no greater concerns than tending to their flowers, women in these home movies represent both the order and control maintained within their households. They assure viewers that women are unconcerned with and uninvolved in anything beyond their garden walls. Cultural

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<sup>678</sup> Zimmerman, 81.

<sup>679</sup> Buettner, 65.

geographer Rosemary Marangoly George argues that housekeeping guides encouraged women in India to think of managing their homes and their staffs of servants as a serious vocation. In keeping their homes orderly, clean and in a fantasized English style, they helped to keep the imperial order running smoothly.<sup>680</sup> In this light, tending to rosebushes (or overseeing servants who tend to the rosebushes)—perhaps not coincidentally, as roses are a symbol of England—was not a leisurely hobby but an act of imperial administration. Colonial white women’s greatest preoccupations, according to these films, were to groom themselves and their gardens and keep both in picture-perfect condition, highlighting the “privilege of [their] chosen [lives]” in the empire.

If women are “meant” to be photographed and accepted their, to use Laura Mulvey’s phrase, “to-be-looked-at-ness,” men have a much more uneasy relationship with the camera.<sup>681</sup> When they appear, which is infrequently compared with their female counterparts and the family’s children, they often avoid acknowledging the camera, even when it is clear that they have set up the shot themselves.

In one of Layard’s films someone other than Layard is behind the camera. An Indian servant trims Layard’s hair under the supervision of his young daughter. She is clearly aware that they are being filmed; he seems determined to pretend to be oblivious. She teases him and dances about, pointing towards the camera, trying to convince him to acknowledge being filmed. Finally, only when she firmly grabs hold of and raises his crossed leg awkwardly in the air does he glance sheepishly over his shoulder into the camera. The film ends immediately. Layard’s reluctance to be filmed may have come

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<sup>680</sup> Rosemary Marangoly George, “Homes in the Empire, Empires in the Home,” *Cultural Critique* 26 (Winter 1993-1994), 95-127.

<sup>681</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in Toby Miller and Robert Stam, eds. *Film and Theory: An Anthology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000),

from simply shyness or from a sense of being out of control of the filming. It may also have come from a sense that women were meant to be filmed and men meant to be filmmakers—women to be looked at and men to do the looking. His apparent discomfort suggests an uneasiness in amending strict gender roles. White men could only comfortably appear in home movies, in the same settings as their wives, if they were unaware of being filmed.

Peyton and Vernede display a similar reluctance to be filmed, perhaps for the same reasons. Peyton appears just twice in 520 minutes of film. The first time is in a staged ‘candid’ moment in which he, Everly, and their daughter ‘discover’ his daughter’s wedding announcement in the paper. The second time is on his daughter’s wedding day, grinning somewhat awkwardly while his daughter adjusts the medals on his dress uniform. Even though Vernede was not his family’s documentarian, he appears only a handful of times in his family’s films, generally only when the family had company. Avoiding the camera may have also meant avoiding being identified too closely with their wives’ identities as people of leisure. By remaining behind the camera or out of its gaze, films identified men as workers, either as filmmakers or occupied outside of the domestic space. The home then becomes one dominated by women and children.

In fact, children are the most filmed members of the family. If home movies most often situate women in the garden, framed by flowers, children most often appear in wide open spaces. They are in constant motion—playing cricket and tennis, chasing puppies, swimming, putting on performances. They are rarely formally posed. They are very conscious of being filmed. Rather than simply meeting the camera’s gaze, as their mothers seem to do, children are more likely to perform for the camera, what Erens calls

“mugging.”<sup>682</sup> This iconographic environment of the lawn and the focus on children’s movement not only allowed filmmakers to demonstrate the capabilities of their camera’s technology, capturing motion, it also allowed filmmakers to depict the strength, health, and vigor of colonial children.

Colonial parents were particularly concerned with emphasizing the health of their children. Childrearing manuals and household guides of the period stressed imagined physical dangers to British children raised in the colonies.<sup>683</sup> Experts feared these children were at risk for all manner of diseases unknown to children in Europe, making them generally weak, sallow, and slow compared to their European counterparts.<sup>684</sup>

Buettner explains,

Medical experts continually proclaimed European children in India to be ‘pale, flabby, and have an unhealthy appearance’; ‘slight, weedy, and delicate’; ‘listless’; and lacking ‘the all around physiological tone, physical robustness, muscular rotundity, hardness, plumpness, and rosy complexions of children in the same class in this country [Britain].’<sup>685</sup>

Any rearing beyond the age of six or seven, according to the guides, entailed risks; eventually the Indian environment—the sun and the heat in particular—would take its toll.<sup>686</sup> Experts believed that eventually the heat and sun of Indian summers would produce physical and psychological disorders. Some families chose to spend part of the

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<sup>682</sup> Erens, 18.

<sup>683</sup> The seminal theoretical work on this subject is Ann Stoler’s *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*. Several other scholars have taken up similar studies in the Indian case. See for example Alison Blunt, *Domicile and Diaspora: Anglo-Indian Women and the Spatial Politics of Home* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005); Rosemary Marangoly George, “Homes in the Empire, Empires in the Home,” *Cultural Critique* 26; Elizabeth Buettner, *Empire Families: Britons and Late Imperial India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>684</sup> Buettner, 46.

<sup>685</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>686</sup> Alison Blunt, “Imperial Geographies of Home: British Domesticity in India, 1886-1925,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 24, no. 4 (1999), 432.

year in cooler hill stations to recuperate, while many others chose to send their children to Britain for schooling in their formative years.<sup>687</sup>

Concerns about the weather were not parents' only motivation for sending children back home for their education. Tied up with these fears of physical degeneration were concerns about cultural contamination of colonial children. Extended rearing in the colonies would, experts cautioned, lead to children who identified more closely with Indian culture—food, language, dress—and more importantly, with Indians—who parents often charged with their children's daily care—than with British culture and their British parents.<sup>688</sup> The amount of freedom parents' afforded children and their constant attending by servants created petulant, demanding children.<sup>689</sup> Of greatest concern, however, was that the close relationships between white children and Indian servants would create white children who failed to live up to the standards of European culture, a subject to which I will return. Parents hoped that schooling in Britain would give children a proper education in British culture, producing always another and another generation of unambiguously British administrators in the empire. They would learn to have a taste for British food, be forced to speak "proper" English, learn appropriate manners, and come to associate with other whites over the servants to whom they became intimately accustomed in their homes in India.

Home movies, however, showed hale and hearty white children growing up like their metropolitan counterparts. By the time they acquired their camera, the Peytons' daughter was already an adult, but the Vernedes and the Layards both had young children

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<sup>687</sup> Alison Blunt, *Domicile and Diaspora: Anglo-Indian Women and the Spatial Politics of Home* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 31.

<sup>688</sup> Buettner, *op. cit.* and Blunt, "Imperial Geographies," 433-435.

<sup>689</sup> Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, 136.

at home. The Layard girls swam, rode horses, jumped rope, practiced calisthenics and posture, and chased the family's bull terrier around the yard. The children in the Vernede house pushed prams around lawn, hosted tea parties, played cricket, and took tennis lessons. Their home movies depict a world in which no one could ever question their children's health or the Britishness of their upbringing. The children, like their parents, always dress immaculately and always in "western" clothing. No film ever hints that colonial children often had to be forced into their "European" clothes from their much preferred "local" dress.<sup>690</sup> Indian servants, as I will show in the next section, remain at a distance, never touching white children, but interestingly, so too do British mothers, who are almost never filmed with their children. Whether this absence of white mothers represented a reflection of the families' reality, in which servants very often took care of most of the children's daily needs, is unclear. But while filmmakers devoted much footage to documenting the families' children, they were less interested in children's interactions with their parents or filming the family as a whole.

Home movies documented British homes in India as bustling, happy, ordered places in which family members' roles were clear. Wives dressed in pretty frocks and oversaw the immaculate care of the home, planned weddings and parties, and played with the families' purebred dogs.<sup>691</sup> Children played freely in vast compounds, safe from any threat from the outside world and firmly inculcated with European interests. In many ways these subjects seem unsurprising and perhaps not so different from what we might

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<sup>690</sup> Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, 116 and Blunt, *Domicile*, 1.

<sup>691</sup> In fact, the family dogs appear so often that they are immediately recognizable. The Vernedes had a penchant for Dachshunds; the Layards had their ever-present bull terrier. It is always immediately apparent when the family has visitors—often first signaled by the appearance of an unfamiliar dog in the film. The Layard girls were rarely without their terrier. When the Vernedes' Dachshunds had puppies, Ms. Donaldson documented their growth and interaction with the family almost fetishistically. On one hand, the purebred dogs signaled the families' social status and the normalcy of the family.

expect to see in similar films from Britain. But the noticeable absences, the memories these filmmakers chose not to record or acknowledge, potentially suggest some of the anxieties of these filmmakers.

### **“The Colony Without the Colonized”**

That these homes movies focused primarily on the family—the mother and children in particular—is not especially surprising. What is surprising, however, is the extent to which filmmakers excluded Indians from representations of the family unit. Scholars working on colonial families have noted the extent to which families’ memories of their homes in the colony centered on their relationships with domestic servants. In fact they stressed that these servants were not just integral to the household but that Raj families considered Indian servants to be members of the family. In fact Stoler and Buettner have both shown that domestic servants made consistent appearances in family photographs and that while in some servants lingered on the outskirts of the family unit, “Many images place servants firmly within the intimacy of family bonds, displaying a domestic order that was comforting and shared.”<sup>692</sup>

Yet these photographs largely came from professional photographers who might have spent only a few hours with the family. In these three home movie collections, produced by members of the family, servants appear only rarely. When they do appear, filmmakers do not paint them as family members but as further proof of the family’s status. Far from being embraced as members of the family, Indian domestic servants

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<sup>692</sup> Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, 188. See also Buettner’s discussion of family photographs in *Empire Families*. Although Stoler also notes that servants, even those interspersed with the white family, sometimes went completely unnamed and ignored in the captions to these photographs. Former domestic workers she interviewed in Java insisted that they had never been included in family photos and were surprised that Stoler had found so many examples in which other domestic workers had appeared (188-193). She records, “When we asked Bu Darmo if she had been photographed with her employers, she scoffed, ‘Dutch people would never have wanted a picture with Javanese,’ because they were simply not allowed to ‘mix’” (193).



appear only as specters in the background of white domestic life. In fact, I would argue that Stoler and Buettner may have misread the inclusion of Indian servants family photographs in light of what they both admit are memories tinged with nostalgia. The use of Indian domestic servants in home movies suggests that filmmakers included Indians as living props for putting the family's wealth and power on display. Perhaps family albums include photos of domestic servants for similar reasons—not necessarily because white album-makers saw them as members of the family or wanted to remember them as such but because documenting and remembering their presence reminded families of their status and relative power.

In 1995 Vernede edited a collection of stories from and about the Raj. In his editorial note on the chapter on servants, Vernede's assessment suggests that the rhetoric of servants as extended members of the British family was just that, a rhetoric to be repeated as an apology for the relationship between the British and their servants. He explained that "In the course of more than twenty or more years' service, very close ties of affection grew up between many Indian servants and their British masters."<sup>693</sup> Stoler

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<sup>693</sup> R. V. Vernede, ed., *British Life in India: An Anthropology of Humorous and Other Writings Perpetrated by the British in India, 1750-1950, with Some Latitude for Works Completed After Independence* (Dehli: Oxford University Press, 1997), 96.

The book's original publication by Oxford University Press in 1995 strikes me as interesting since, in reading Vernede's, commentary one could easily imagine that it was published in 1925. There is no general editor's note or any apology for the way Vernede describes India, Indians, or British privilege in India. The frontispiece is a poem by Edward Lear, "The Cumberbund—An Indian Poem," then the book launches into Vernede's editor's introduction to the first section of stories on "Newcomers," without any general introduction to the collection. All that signals what the publishing house imagined the volume to be is the back cover description:

This anthology of humorous prose and verse present the lighter side of British life in India during the Raj. It comprises writings culled out of a huge variety of books, journals and newspapers, all written during that period. The authors featuring in this anthology represent a wide cross-section of the British population resident in India over colonial times—from Kipling to less well-known Indian Civil Service officers and their memsahibs.

...This is a book that will not only delight all readers who wish to savour the zest, the elegance, the condescension and the charm of white men going slowly brown in India, but will also interest cultural historians and students of the Indo-Anglian literary relationship.

has demonstrated that while Dutch administrators claimed affection for and reciprocated affection from their Javanese servants, former servants later remember feeling distance from and not fondness for their employers.<sup>694</sup> In fact, Vernede chose only to include stories about “rogues” rather than cherished servants because “eulogy can become tedious.”<sup>695</sup> Still he assured readers that “the balance [in the chapter] is undoubtedly wrong,” that most domestic servants were well-loved.<sup>696</sup>

Still if Vernede claims that “British masters” felt intense fondness for their Indian employees, he does little to make this evident in his writing. The closest he comes is a backhanded compliment that “Most Indian servants were trustworthy, ingenious and honest according to their own code, which allowed for certain perquisites.”<sup>697</sup> Vernede described the large household staffs as a matter of course in Indian society, not a display of ostentatious show or even a question of family loyalty. At their heart, according to Vernede, Indian staffs enabled British administrators the ability to “maintain some semblance of European life-style in reasonable comfort despite a hostile climate and strange customs.”<sup>698</sup>

As for the large size of household staffs in India, however, Vernede blamed this on Indian traditions. He criticized both Hindu and Muslim customs for exponentially expanding the staff because “higher-caste or –class servants could not be asked to perform any task beyond that for which they had been engaged, and in no case any task

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No mention is made of the recent work done on this very relationship nor prescient evaluations of the Raj. The romance—“the lighter side,” the zest,” “the elegance,” “the charm”—and the imagined danger—“white men slowly going brown”—of British life in India.

<sup>694</sup> Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, Epilogue.

<sup>695</sup> Ibid.

<sup>696</sup> Ibid.

<sup>697</sup> Vernede, 96.

<sup>698</sup> Ibid.

for which a lower-caste man had been engaged”<sup>699</sup> He argued that “[b]ecause of the absence of class restrictions” in places like Malaysia, “the British needed only two or three household servants” and were “content with rather more easy-going standards” for household staffing.<sup>700</sup>

Moreover, according to Vernede, the demand for large staffs came from a need to meet Indian expectations. He claimed that “Indians themselves would have been shocked if they had found a British family...trying to ‘do’ for themselves.”<sup>701</sup> According to Vernede, Indian “tradition,” their experience of past rulers, created an expectation that “the ruling class” would employ large staffs of Indian servants and therefore expected “their present rulers to keep up something, if only a shadow, of that ancient splendor.”<sup>702</sup> In the end he dismissed any reflective criticisms of the employment of large Indian household staffs, claiming,

In India it was far more sensible to follow tradition, especially when this was more convenient, than to be led into aberration by humanitarian or moral arguments. Whether this is a worthy attitude, I leave philosophers to argue.<sup>703</sup>

Massive staffs, according to Vernede, were a function of Indian society, not of the showy nature of the Raj.

Families who, had they remained in Britain, might not have had the means to employ one servant could (and in domestic guides, were even encouraged to) maintain a staff of a dozen or more.<sup>704</sup> Even families in Britain with even greater economic status rarely employed more than five servants.<sup>705</sup> If Anglo-Indian status threatened to

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<sup>699</sup> Ibid.

<sup>700</sup> Ibid, 106.

<sup>701</sup> Ibid.

<sup>702</sup> Ibid.

<sup>703</sup> Ibid, 107.

<sup>704</sup> Buettner, 37.

<sup>705</sup> Blunt, “Imperial Geographies,” 429.

compromise the “racial” status of British administrators, huge staffs and lavish compounds could do wonders to bolster social status.

Filmmakers most often film male servants in groups, eliding any individual roles or even identities and focusing on sheer numbers. On occasion filmmakers capture male servants with members of the white family, always showing them in subservient roles—accompanying the wife on her walk through the garden or helping a child onto a pony. For four pages of his ten-page description titled “Servants,” Vernede describes the layout of the “typical” British household in India—from the verandah to the bedrooms and bathrooms to the kitchen to the stables.<sup>706</sup> Similarly, in this and the other two families’ home movie collections, servants themselves fade into the domestic background.

Instead in films, domestic employees seem to appear as proof—proof of the family’s status, proof of their easy home lives, and proof of the distance maintained between white families and their Indian servants. In fact, rather than being incorporated into the family unit, male servants are merely mobile props in the construction of the domestic sphere. When Donaldson filmed several male servants mowing the lawn, her primary focus is clearly not the men who happen to be in the frame; the majority of the reel is a wide shot of the expansive, manicured lawn, which is only highlighted by the men pushing lawnmowers across its length. Donaldson pans from servants setting up a child’s birthday party across the vast yard; the men at work become merely moving lawn ornaments. She films a servant holding one of the family’s horses. The man is clearly in the way of the real subject of the film—the horse. Donaldson quickly reframes the shot to eliminate the servant’s face and center the horse’s in the frame. Layard films a servant

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<sup>706</sup> Vernede, 97-101.

sweeping up dog waste in the yard, clearly a chore his imperial status has allowed him to dodge.

Donaldson's collection includes two films of Indian servants with their own families. In one, Indian men and children clear grass after the monsoon season. The other shows men and children around their homes. While these homes were likely situated within the same compound, probably within a half a mile of the Vernedes' bungalow, the film clearly ghettoizes this part of the compound as being solely Indian. None of the Vernede family appear in this part of the film, even though they are the main subject of most of Donaldson's reels and even though these Indian children may very well have been frequent playmates of the Vernede children. The films make clear that Indian servants have their own children, families, and homes that remained separate from those of the Vernede family. Unlike the memories of many former colonials and even their photo albums, these films suggest that work and domestic life were clearly defined for Indian servants.

When male servants appear with white children, they maintain a physical distance. They stand by to help children onto ponies, push children in prams, and watch children play, but they never actually touch the family's children. In one of Donaldson's films a male servant leans into the playpen of a young child, speaking to the baby and trying to hand him a ball, but never touching the child. The camera cuts out suddenly and when filming resumes the servant stands in the background of the shot while the child's mother lifts him out of the playpen and carries him into the house. In another of Donaldson's films, a young girl invites one of the family's servants to inspect her tea

party. She reaches toward him to tug him forward, but he glances at the camera and hangs back.

Much as experts voiced concerns about the physical and psychological toll living in India might take on white children, child-rearing manuals cautioned parents about the imagined dangers of physical contact between white children and Indian servants. Whether or not they actually took charge of caring for white children, manuals claimed that the very proximity of Indian men exposed white children to all manner of germs and disease.<sup>707</sup> Avoiding images of physical contact meant that filmmakers avoided criticism of colonial parenting decisions.

At any rate male servants generally had far less contact with white children than their female counterpart, the family ayah. Ayahs are a nexus for nostalgia in many postcolonial memories. Ayahs were, in general, the only female servants in household staffs that often numbered ten or twelve, and as such spent much of their time with the families' mothers and especially the children.<sup>708</sup> Her roles placed her in the most intimate position of all domestic servants; she

acted as a maid for her British mistress and often cared for young children. An *ayah's* daily duties included bringing early morning tea to her mistress, preparing the bathroom, tidying the bedroom and mending clothes, bringing her into more intimate contact with a British wife than any other servant.<sup>709</sup>

As such, however, she came under extreme scrutiny in child-rearing manuals. Experts expressed concern that such close contact with "native" nursemaids threatened the proper development of white children. They accused white mothers in the colonies of abandoning their children's care to these nursemaids so that they could indulge in

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<sup>707</sup> Stoler, 74.

<sup>708</sup> Blunt, "Imperial Geographies," 432.

<sup>709</sup> *Ibid.*, 432.

frivolous social lives and warned that such neglect could “redirect [children’s] cultural longings, the smells they preferred, the tastes they craved, and their sexual desires,” threatening their very Europeaness.<sup>710</sup> Some guides found that allowing ayahs to tend to babies—though emphatically never as wetnurses—might be acceptable, but children past infancy should be left in the care of British governesses.<sup>711</sup>

These criticisms may have done little to affect mothering practices in the Empire, but they may have influenced the way in which imperial families chose to depict themselves in home movies, creating a discomfort for recording practices for which they might be criticized. In fact in the dozen or so hours of footage I watched, not a single female servant appeared. These families’ ayahs may simply have eluded the camera, too busy working inside the home, where the cameras could not reach them, or their work in the home may have been erased because it did not interest filmmakers. But with their work being so intimately tied to the main subjects of these films—white women and children—it seems strange that ayahs never appear, even in the background.

For his part Vernede too had little to say about ayahs in his writing. What he did say suggests that his family, at least, did not envision their ayah as a member of the extended family. He described ayahs as “apt to be volatile” and that “an uneasy truce prevailed” between her and the male employees of the household.<sup>712</sup> In the end the most he had to say about ayahs was to quote Flora Anne Steel,

We may only remark that, with very few exceptions, Indian ayahs are singularly kind, injudicious, patient, and thoughtless in their care of children: but to expect

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<sup>710</sup> Stoler,

<sup>711</sup> Blunt, “Imperial Geographies,” 434-436 and Buettner, 45. Even when there were no young children to be tended, housekeeping manuals encouraged memsahibs to keep an ayah on staff in order to tend to her own needs as well as those of any female guests, so while the Peytons had no young children at home they may still have employed an ayah. See Blunt, 434.

<sup>712</sup> Vernede, 103.

anything like common sense from them is to lay yourself open to certain disappointment.<sup>713</sup>

This exclusion may reflect filmmakers' discomfort in admitting the role of Indian nursemaids in raising their children. Much like eliminating images of interactions between male servants and children might have avoided criticism about colonial parenting practices, so too might the exclusion of ayahs who played such an important role in the lives of imperial families.

### **“Sheltered From Time”**

Memmi argues that the colonial demands that his “mother country” be “sheltered from time,” that any modernization threatens his status in the colony by exposing the colonial’s anachronistic power, threatens to bring down the empire from its imagined seat of power.<sup>714</sup> All three collections contain films shot in Britain, and these reels seem to illustrate Memmi’s theory. On a trip “home” Donaldson shot footage of foggy, rolling British hillsides. Layard filmed forms of “traditional” British labor—shepherds and fishermen. But home movies shot in India suggest that filmmakers also attempted to make the colony appear “sheltered from time,” apolitical and premodern. In so doing their films memorialized an unchanging world over which colonials could maintain control.

Art historian James Ryan argues that colonial photography created an apology for the British empire, demonstrating that places like India were unspoiled and untouched and therefore worthy of imperial protection.<sup>715</sup> Images like those in home movies depict India and its people as majestic and peaceful, unchanged and unchanging, reassuring

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<sup>713</sup> Ibid.

<sup>714</sup> Memmi, 61.

<sup>715</sup> James R. Ryan, *Picturing Empire* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 23.



images for filmmakers for whom changing India could lead to their unemployment and exile, the end of their “easy living.” India in these films is not a place of nationalist aspirations or social strife but an enclave from modernity.

Just as filmmakers avoided filming domestic servants in their home spaces, in films outside the home they likewise avoided filming Indians to a great extent. When they did, they focused on what might have been considered “traditional” aspects of Indian life and labor. Donaldson filmed men and women carrying heavy loads on their backs, weaving fabric, harvesting crops by hand, and washing clothes in the river. Layard, too, shot scenes of women washing clothes at a riverbank and men sifting minerals by hand. Each of the three filmmakers captures shots of Indian crowds—an Indian marketplace, Indians along the river, and Indian street. The goal in these crowd scenes seems not to be filming Indian people but to film the Indian crowd itself as some kind of phenomenon. Filmmakers show no interest in the individuals in the crowd, only the existence of the crowd itself—its movement, its size, its dynamism.

Yet filmmakers only shoot films that appear controlled and from vantage points of power. Donaldson, for example, captured images of Indians from the elevation of a train car and from a balcony overlooking a marketplace, Layard from the distance of a riverboat. None of the collections contains footage of riots or protests; just as home movies’ families exist only in moments of peace and joy, India itself is serene and content in these films. None of these filmmakers ever documents Indians at work in any number of white collar jobs or Indians in “western” dress. Home movies erased any

suggestion that Indians were anything other than specimens of their “natural” environment or that they had any desires or demands beyond their daily lives.<sup>716</sup>

Like their images of Indian workers, filmmakers’ images of India itself focused on its naturalness. Stephen Bann has argued that the image of the Indian countryside was photographed within the context of the artistic notion of the picturesque, “projecting western pictorial concepts onto an unknown landscape.”<sup>717</sup> The picturesque movement called for portraits of “picture-ready” landscapes, but which also stressed the “wild” and “natural” qualities of the land. All three filmmakers use films taken outside the home to capture the fog rising off a mountain, a particularly striking waterfall, or an expanse of pristine forest. Donaldson dedicated minutes of expensive film to an Indian mountain haloed in low-lying clouds, a shot that closely mirrored those she filmed of the British hillside.

Yet each filmmaker juxtaposes images of “traditional” India with images of its physical modernization, using mechanical labor to overturn the landscape: drilling for oil, digging for minerals, clearing forests. Indians have no control over the process in these films. Machines seem to run on their own; no Indians appear in the frame with machinery.

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<sup>716</sup> By contrast, when filming European crowds, the camera is never at a privileged or distanced position. Instead it is firmly embedded within the crowd, positioned at ground level. As opposed to the Indian crowd, which is generally filmed so that subjects face the camera, the position of the filmmaker as part of the European crowd is reinforced by the fact that the crowd is almost always shot from behind; the viewer sees, for the most part, only the backs of European heads. Unlike the films of Indian crowds, the mass itself is not the focus of the film; instead the center of attention is the reason for which the group has gathered: a parade, a performance, a speech, a religious service, a monument. The European crowd merely forms the “background” for and the context of the filmmaker’s real subject.

<sup>717</sup> Stephan Bann, “Antiquarianism, Visuality, and the Exotic Monument: William Hodges's A Dissertation,” in Maria Antonella Pelizzari, *Traces of India: Photography, Architecture, and the Politics of Representation 1850-1900* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 15.

Several scholars have suggested that “modernization” and its documentation by photographers represented a means for maintaining control over and an apologia for empire. Fanon, for example, argued that “Cutting railroads through the bush, draining swamps, ignoring the political and economic existence of the native population are in fact one and the same.”<sup>718</sup> “Modernization” in colonial terms meant further stripping the rights of Indians to the land and the money and power attached to the land. But through documenting this transition, colonial photographers painted a picture of industrialization as a gift to local populations. Art historian Maria Pelizzari argues that documenting this process allowed imperialists to justify their actions by illuminating the benefits afforded—“the dense jungle being rendered productive and the remains of mythic empires being brought to light.”<sup>719</sup> In documenting India’s modernization in the twentieth century, filmmakers gave visual justification for their continued presence and rule.

These home movies suggest that whites in India, even in the last thirty years of their rule, saw themselves as living charmed lives. Their films register no sense of anxiety or impending doom. But they do so by erasing much of what defined their lives in India—their contact with Indians at work and at home. India in these home movies is a place in which Indians live only in the background, only as servants of one form or another to white families. There is no Congress. There are no Indian soldiers fighting in an imperial war, no Indian politics, no Indian police, no Indian clerks. India is a place that is only being modernized under guiding, if unseen, British hands. What home

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<sup>718</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 182.

<sup>719</sup> Maria Pelizzari, “Introduction,” in Pelizzari, 16.

movies memorialize is a place in which the British maintained absolute control, right up to an end that they never show.

## **Conclusion** **Imperial Culture in the Twentieth Century?**

This thesis argues that studies of imperial culture must undertake a new program of analysis. Changing the focus of research from cultural texts to that of audience responses to and interactions with those texts demonstrates shifting perspectives on India that studies of films alone have not accessed. Investigating the role played by the international film industry demonstrates the extent to which so-called British imperial culture was produced on a global scale in the early twentieth century. I have used the term “imperial culture” fairly freely throughout this thesis. Yet the role played by continental and especially the American film industries made clear in the previous chapters begs the question: To what extent and in what ways was imperial culture actually imperial in the twentieth century? Here I would like to suggest how challenging the notion of imperial culture might open other profitable avenues of scholarship.

Scholarship on imperial culture means implicitly defining that culture, a definition that has most often taken two forms: imperial culture as storytelling about the empire or imperial culture as products created within the empire and reflecting connections produced by the imperial ties. And yet as I have shown here, both of these definitions neglect critical dimensions of India films. The conflicting interests of the American film industry, British officials, and the Indian independence movement simultaneously produced British newsreels about Gandhi in ways difficult to unravel. British expatriates’ films of India often erased or effaced Indians from their filmic Indian landscape.

In similar ways, Himansu Rai intended his Indian-produced films to stand as beacons of *swadeshi* and proof of India's inherent ability to govern itself. But he never explicitly addresses the British empire in their plots nor the fact that he bankrolled his films with German funds. Moreover, British audiences, as I have shown, discussed Rai's films almost without reference to the imperial connections between India and Britain.

So too does a film like *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* highlight some of the extra-imperial forces that shaped the viewing of this 'imperial' story. The film told a story about people and places in the British empire, yet audiences did not simply understand *Bengal Lancer* as an imperial story. For some audiences the film also represented a flashpoint for discussing the threat of American power overthrowing Britain's imagined place in the world. For others its popularity represented a means through which to argue against gender stereotypes. For others still it represented a way of talking about the place of the Muslim community in Britain. If empire was at the center of the story, it was not always at the center of the way British audiences' interpreted the story. And of course *Bengal Lancer* in no way fit the second criteria, produced in an American studio, filmed in the foothills of Southern California, and starring an actor from Montana playing the role of a Canadian to explain away his American accent.

If these definitions tend to negate the global nature of what we call 'imperial culture,' they also tend to erase the difference between representations of different places in the empire and how audiences responded to these representations. India, of course, was only one of many colonies incorporated in the British empire in the twentieth century and only one of many that helped to shape British culture. In fact in the same period this thesis addresses, both American and British studios released a plethora of films on

Africa. These films, like *Sanders of the River* (1935) and *Stanley and Livingstone* (1939), have been studied in much the same way as India films—as free-floating themes without a real study of contextualized audience responses—and have often been lumped together with India films because of their shared imperial themes.

What remains to be seen is whether the empire and imperial themes were the only or even the dominant context through which British audiences understood these films. If part of the context for British interpretations of India films often hinged on the fact that India was vying for its freedom, this was not necessarily part of the context through which they understood films about Africa. It is necessary to disentangle these contexts (and also to note where they may have merged) rather than to too easily lump them as empire films and therefore obviously connected. Only in unraveling the analytic categories audiences used can we begin to understand how these films circulated through British society, the role they played in shaping British visions of India, Africa, and the empire, and how debates surrounding them give us potential access to how the British understood their position in India and Africa and their role in the empire in the twentieth century. In fact, perhaps even more importantly, by delving more deeply into audience reception we may find it necessary to ask how and to what extent audiences saw these films as speaking to one monolithic empire at all. Did they see Africa as part of the empire in the same way as India? Or did they envision unique relationships with each area of what formed the British empire?

Here too we can see the influence of Hollywood in shaping the genre, how national, imperial, and international processes bumped up against one another, reshaping each other over time. Between 1935 and 1942 British studios produced three movies

about Africa—*Sanders of the River*, *King Solomon's Mines* (1937), and *The Four Feathers* (1939)—while American studios produced at least thirteen. I have demonstrated how Hollywood attempted to walk the line between American anti-British-imperialism, the imagined British patriotism that would be produced by putting any imperial story on the screen, and how this dynamic shifted as India came to play a crucial role in the Allied war effort.<sup>720</sup> Did this same kind of balancing act exist in terms of films about Africa? How, for example, did American interest in the role of Africa in the Second World War come to shape the kinds of events newsreel cameramen filmed? How did this shape the kinds of stories dispatched to British newsreel screens and shape what British audiences believed they knew about Africa?

I would like to offer two examples that suggest the work that still needs to be done in the arenas of audience reception and international forces in shaping what we call imperial culture, two examples that I believe merit further research and exploration.

The first is an example to further highlight the ways studying audience reception might reshape our readings of films about Africa and how they relate to an empire cinema. Scholars have noted that even in the era of strict Production Code and BBFC regulation of scenes of nudity, films of Africa often included women dancing with their breasts exposed. Shohat and Stam, for example, identify this as “a double standard erotics”:

...the Production Code of the Motion Picture Producers and Directors of America, Inc, 1930-1934, which censored Jane's two-piece into one in later *Tarzan* films, left intact the naked African women in the background, evoking a *National*

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<sup>720</sup> Here I am distinguishing between the idea of American anti-imperialism, which I think is unsupportable considering the U.S.'s own national history, and American anti-British-imperialism, a rhetorical distaste for the British empire.



*Geographic*-style prurient delight in unilateral native nudity. The portrayal of dance rituals...displayed alien flesh to hint at the masculinist pleasures of exploration. ... The cinematic exposure of the dark naked body nourished spectatorial desire, while marking of imaginary boundaries between “self” and “other”...<sup>721</sup>

Implicit in this analysis seems to be the assumption that this mapping of desire happened subconsciously and without reflection from audiences or filmmakers: naked black women dance before the cameras and white clothed audiences are delighted without giving the scene much thought.

A letter sent to Jacob Mayer, whose sociological study of filmgoing I discussed in Chapter Three, suggests some of the similarities and some of the differences between audience interpretations of India films and those about Africa. Mayer asked respondents to tell him whether films had ever made them feel dissatisfied with their own lives. A 26-year-old housewife responded,

Do films make me dissatisfied? Definitely they do! I find myself comparing my home, my clothes, even my husband. I get extremely restless and have a longing to explore uncharted lands.

Sometimes after seeing such films as *Sanders of the River* and *King Solomon's Mines*, I have a feeling—a savage, exultant feeling and I want to dance to the beat of native drums. The thud-thud of tom-toms always shakes me to the depths. Such is the effect of films on me. ... So drab is my real life that my screen world must be colourful and exciting—something to stir the emotions and lift one to a mad, unholy heaven!<sup>722</sup>

In some ways her letter is similar to those I discussed earlier about India films; she argues that going to the cinema to see films about Africa gives her an *ersatz* opportunity for adventure. These films also gave her an opportunity to imagine a life outside of the confines of her domestic routine.

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<sup>721</sup> Shohat and Stam, 109.

<sup>722</sup> J.P. Mayer, *British Cinemas and Their Audiences: Sociological Studies* (London: D. Dobson, 1948).

Yet her response to these two films about Africa also reveals a significant difference from letters from women about India films. Women wrote about identifying with the male adventurer in India films; this housewife writes of identifying with the “native” characters in films about Africa. Her sense of excitement around the film does not revolve around the sense that, in following the white male adventurer’s story, she has become a vicarious adventurer but around the sense that she might identify with the black dancers. In one sense, of course, this spectatorial desire did, as Shohat and Stam suggest, force her to draw a line between this viewer—a 26-year-old British housewife—and “them”—African dancers performing before the anthropological camera. Yet it also suggests another way in which her response worked to blur those lines, her wish not to become a white male adventurer and “discover” such scenes but to dispense with her own identity and take one that she believed to belong to the African dancers on the screen.

Two letters to *Picturegoer* suggest that some audiences were as eager as contemporary scholars to analyze such scenes and expose what they, too, saw as a double standard in code enforcement. In July 1937 Miss H. Demark of Poplar wrote to *Picturegoer* to complain about the costuming in films like *Sanders of the River* and *Wings Over Africa*. She fretted,

the black women hardly wore anything. Now, I don’t think that’s right; after all, they are human the same was we, and just because they happen to be black it does not mean to say that they do not have to wear anything.<sup>723</sup>

For Demark, the studios were to blame for this double standard, not because they produced these films nor for exploiting their subjects’ bodies for profit but because they had not forced the women into clothing before allowing them to appear in the film. As for the women, Demark griped, “It may be their own way in their own country but at

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<sup>723</sup> “What Do You Think?,” *Picturegoer* 3 July 1937, 36.

least they ought to put something on them when taking part in a film.”<sup>724</sup> Moreover she fussed, “its [sic] not very nice if you have a brother or boy-friend sitting next to you.”<sup>725</sup> Her concerns not only revolved around whether it was fitting to have topless black women on the screen but also, it seems, a sense of discomfort and self-consciousness at the kind of arousal these images might spark in white male audiences.

Three weeks later *Picturegoer* published a response from Miss Herta Gotthelf of London who expressed pity for “the young lady who was so embarrassed by the half-naked negro women in *Sanders of the River*.” For Gotthelf the African women in *Sanders* were “much more dignified and decent than many of the film ‘cuties’ that grace the screen.”<sup>726</sup> She reasoned,

If white women would possess the same naturalness and unselfconsciousness, and if it would be natural to our civilization to go naked, then why shouldn’t they?

But as it is not the case, we ought at least to be grateful that the film gives us the possibility to see that part of humanity that has kept some of its natural innocence.

There are many things in the average films that are more indecent, disgusting and demoralising than a naked black body.<sup>727</sup>

For Gotthelf, Demark’s embarrassment marked a different kind of double standard, one in which a white “cutie” could be displayed in stages of undress while black bodies must be covered.

Of course both arguments harkened back to those of the previous century over African women’s breasts, debates that gendered colonial discourse and provided apologia

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<sup>724</sup> Ibid.

<sup>725</sup> Ibid.

<sup>726</sup> “What Do You Think?” *Picturegoer* 24 July 1937, 32.

<sup>727</sup> Ibid.

for colonization.<sup>728</sup> Yet these are the kinds of audience debates in a film's reception that textual analysis of films discuss without actually accessing. British audiences, too, saw an irony in the display of naked black bodies when white breasts were forbidden from the screen. That this 'conversation' took place between two women writers suggests that one of the categories of analysis through which white female audiences understood these films was as a covert commentary on and even a critique of British women's imagined modesty and prudery as compared with the African women in the film.

Such a debate, it is important to note, would never have been raised around the British studios' and Hollywood's India films, which rarely included female Indian characters, highlighting the need to disentangle the concept of empire cinema with regards to audience responses. If, from a general perspective, films about Africa told stories that seem similar to those told in later India films, a more detailed analysis of audience reception demonstrates they also, as this example demonstrates, told stories that were subtly different from India films. Films about the empire circulated very differently depending on their subject, their location, and even the audience. The category of empire cinema highlights potentially useful similarities between such films but also elides subtle but potentially important differences; in the future scholars might draw upon reception to consider how the category of imperial culture elides other contemporary categories of analysis.

My second example highlights the need to foreground the relationships between national, imperial, and international forces in producing what we call imperial culture. In 1928 black American lawyer, athlete, and actor Paul Robeson left New York to star in the

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<sup>728</sup> See for example Jennifer Morgan, "'Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder': Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770," *William and Mary* 54, 1 (1997), 167-92;

London stage production of *Show Boat*. He remained in London until 1939, performing the role of Othello in 1930 and appearing in several British films.<sup>729</sup> During that time he also studied at the School of Oriental and African Studies and became an active honorary member of the West African Students' Union, forging friendships with Kwame Nkrumah, future president of Ghana, and Jomo Kenyatta, future president of Kenya. Robeson biographer Lloyd L. Brown cites this period in Robeson's life as a seminal one, explaining,

In the heart of the British Empire, then at its zenith, Robeson became a militant anti-imperialist, and he soon broadened that concern to include not only Africa but other colonial countries like India, whose cause he championed in association with revolutionaries like Jawaharlal Nehru, the future Prime Minister of India, who was a Robeson friend in London.<sup>730</sup>

Robeson's interests in Pan-Africanism, his anti-imperialist political activism, and his interactions with British socialists continued to inform his worldview, his political activities, and even his film career for the rest of his life.

Two of his most famous film roles during his time in London were in two of the most noted empire films of the period, London Films' *Sanders of the River* (1935) and Gaumont British's *King Solomon's Mines* (1937). In *Sanders* Robeson played Bosambo, a tribal chief who aids the British District Officer, Sanders (Leslie Banks), in bringing British order to the area.<sup>731</sup> In *King Solomon's Mines* Robeson played Umbopa, an

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<sup>729</sup> Robeson has been the subject of many biographies. See for example, Dorothy Butler Gilliam, *Paul Robeson, All-American* (Washington D.C.: New Republic Book Co., 1976); Ron Ramdin, *Paul Robeson: The Man and His Mission* (London: Peter Owen, 1987); Sheila Tully Boyle, *Paul Robeson: The Years of Promise and Achievement* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001); Scott Allen Nolan, *Paul Robeson, Film Pioneer* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010). Notably Richard Dyer also used Robeson as a case study for his work on star texts. See, Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1986).

<sup>730</sup> Lloyd L. Brown, *The Young Paul Robeson* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 125.

<sup>731</sup> Jomo Kenyatta appeared as an extra in the film, probably at the invitation of Robeson. While Robeson would later speak out against the representation of Africans in the film, I have not found any suggestion that Kenyatta did the same, though it might have seemed more prudent for him to avoid the matter altogether, hoping no one would discover or remember his tangential role in the film.

ousted tribal leader who aids his British friends in discovering the fabled diamond mines of King Solomon and who, in turn, see him restored to his rightful reign.

Robeson would later denounce both films as imperialist propaganda; he even tried to buy the rights to *Sanders* from Korda in order to keep it from being distributed. Later he explained that he had been interested in *Sanders* because of footage “London Films brought back from Africa” which he saw as “good honest pictures of African old ways.”<sup>732</sup> In fact he saw the role as one that spoke to his own ideas about Pan-Africanism, explaining, “Robeson dressed in a leopard skin along with half a dozen other guys from Africa, all looking more or less the same, seemed to me to prove something about my race that I thought worth proving.”<sup>733</sup> The problem, according to Robeson was that Korda edited the project in ways that Robeson had not anticipated when he agreed to the role. According to biographer Martin B. Duberman, “Robeson later told the *New York Amsterdam News* that ‘the imperial angle’ had been ‘placed in the plot during the last five days of shooting,’ and that he had been powerless to protest the shift in emphasis since he had no contract provision for approval of the finished film.”<sup>734</sup> Robeson dismissed the film as “a piece of flag-waving in which I wasn’t interested. As far as I was concerned it was a total loss.”<sup>735</sup>

In fact Robeson claimed he did not even bother to watch the final product until returning to New York in 1939, where it was black Americans who called him to task for starring in a film “which stood for everything they rightly thought I opposed.”<sup>736</sup> Thus

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<sup>732</sup> In Philip S. Foner, ed., *Paul Robeson Speaks: Writings, Speeches, Interviews, 1918-1974* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1978), 121.

<sup>733</sup> Ibid.

<sup>734</sup> Martin B. Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (New York: Knopf, 1988), 179.

<sup>735</sup> Foner, 121.

<sup>736</sup> Ibid.

Robeson—an American who became famous thanks greatly to his roles in British empire films, who believed that he had been promoting black rights through his work, and who had been so moved by the anti-imperialist activism he had encountered in London—found himself back in America, realizing that he had been co-opted into what Korda believed would be a great boon to British national and imperial patriotism (and of course, a profitable product).

In fact, Robeson spoke out so caustically about the film that Korda's choice for his next empire film, *Selar Sabu*, seems less than coincidental. Selar was easy to monitor, his constant attendance by a chaperone not particularly noteworthy since, after all, he was just a child. He was utterly dependent on Korda, having been (perhaps) plucked from his home and replanted in London, especially if *Elephant Boy* cinematographer Osmond Borrodaille's assessment of Selar's older brother Salim's skills as a custodian are any indication—and quite frankly, even if they are not. It seems unlikely that at the age of eleven Selar, who had (perhaps) grown up in one of India's princely states, would have had such an especially well-entrenched view on the British empire that he would feel compelled to share it with interviewers.

More research into the role international figures like Robeson played in the film industry can lead scholars to a greater understanding of how transnational forces helped to shape 'national' and 'imperial' culture. In this thesis I have primarily focused on how these transnational interactions helped to create British national understanding of India and the empire. But Robeson's story also opens the gates to exploring how these interactions around imperial films shaped U.S. history as well.

Robeson returned to the U.S. in 1939 as the most famous black actor in the country and eager to use his celebrity to speak out against segregation in the States. In 1943 he became the first black American to address the annual meeting of Major League Baseball team owners, demanding that black players be allowed to play in the League. In 1945 the NAACP awarded him the Springarn Medal for his professional achievements and his work for racial equality. In September 1946 he led a protest at the Lincoln Memorial for the American Crusade Against Lynching and spoke at a large anti-lynching rally at Madison Square Garden. His widespread fame and popularity could easily have made him one of the most famous faces in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Yet this did not happen. Why?

Answers, of course, require much more in-depth analysis than I can undertake here. But I would like to suggest that the impact of his time in London and his continuing connections to British anti-imperial activists reverberated throughout the rest of his life, preventing him from becoming the powerful representative of and tool for civil rights activists he seemed primed to become in the late 1940s. Robeson's story demonstrates some of the ways that debates around films about Africa also reflect the international shape of American history in the twentieth century.

In April 1949 Robeson spoke in Paris as a representative for the Coordinating Committee of the Colonial Peoples of London. The transcript released by the Associated Press either badly misquoted him or simply fabricated a fantasy speech.<sup>737</sup> In either case their release alienated Robeson from much of the American public. Robeson argued that

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<sup>737</sup> Robeson's son claims to have done research that proves that the AP had already transmitted a copy of Robeson's speech before he even reached the podium that day and that they simply pieced together bits from other speeches he had made in earlier weeks on a trip through Europe. See The National Security Archive, "Interview with Paul Robeson, Jr.," (<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/coldwar/interviews/episode-6/robeson1.html>, accessed 29 July 2011).



war between democracy and communism did not need to be inevitable, that the two systems could resolve their differences peacefully, and that the international working class, including U.S. blacks, wanted to see things resolved without another global war. The AP's transmission instead quoted him as pledging that American blacks would refuse to fight in a war against the Soviet Union, with whom they felt aligned.<sup>738</sup> This fabricated speech not only angered many Americans, it sparked an investigation by the House Committee on Un-American Activities and forced the NAACP, with whom Robeson had previously worked closely, to publicly denounce him, removing him from his status as a civil rights activist and labeling instead simply "an American commissar."<sup>739</sup>

But even before 1949, we can see evidence that the exact roles that brought Robeson to fame with so much of the American public—especially *Bosambo* and *Umbopa*—were also a detriment to his standing in the struggle for black rights. The response on his return to New York in 1939, the one that so shook Robeson, demonstrates that his apparent hypocrisy was not lost on American audiences. What those frustrated audiences saw as his active participation in bolstering British mistreatment of blacks in Africa and his willingness to play the role of a black man who kowtows to white administrators may have damaged his credibility as a voice for black rights in the US.

Robeson also never forgot what he saw as his own personal exploitation and the exploitation of his race in his roles in empire films. In 1942 Robeson finally reached his breaking point with the film industry after being disappointed by the portrayal of his

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<sup>738</sup> Ibid.

<sup>739</sup> "Paul Robeson—The Lost Sheppard," *The Crisis* November 1951, 569.

character, a black sharecropper, in *Tales from Manhattan*. He resolved that he would no longer replicate black stereotypes on screen and would no longer appear in films. *Tales from Manhattan* was, however, only the last straw in a string of frustrations that began in 1935 with *Sanders*. Robeson's withdrawal from the screen also, in many ways, marked a withdrawal from much of the American public's eye, making him a less powerful voice for Civil Rights by relinquishing some of his fame and influence.

It is hard to judge what role Robeson might have played in the later Civil Rights Movement and how his involvement might have reshaped its trajectory, but I think it is fair to say that his alienation removed one of the movement's most famous, charismatic, and at one time, most beloved personalities. More importantly for the purposes of my analysis this estrangement highlights the critical need to delve further into the kind of transnational connections that Robeson and the film industry engendered in the first half of the twentieth century. Robeson's biography demonstrates not only how Hollywood's interest in the British empire came to play a role in how the British envisioned their role in the empire but also how films about the British empire played a role in how Americans thought about their own social structure and their place in the world. How did transnational institutions like the film industry and transnational figures like Robeson reflect, reject, and shape national, imperial, and international movements and what role did figures like Robeson play in reshaping these histories? And how might foregrounding such connections change what we mean when we use the term 'imperial culture'?

Perhaps further research into audience reception and transnational production like the one here will suggest that terms like ‘empire cinema’ and ‘imperial culture’ must be used with caution or at least with more care towards their definitions. Discussions taking place among film audiences suggest that the imperial settings and plotlines of empire films were only one of many categories of analysis through which contemporary audiences interpreted them. Perhaps further research would suggest similar interpretive strategies for the advertisements, children’s books, popular music, cartoons, novels, and radio broadcasts that have been the focus of so much of the new imperial history of the nineteenth century. Does using the empire as a solitary or even a primary category of analysis give us the fullest understanding of how such cultural products moved British audiences? Perhaps we might find that the very category of imperial culture closes off scholarly interpretive strategies before they have been fully realized. Or perhaps we would find that the cinema, perhaps because of its internationality, engendered different feelings from its audiences than its more often “homegrown” counterparts, that films raised questions about Britain and the empire that other kinds of cultural products had not. In a moment marked by the global production of the most popular cultural representations of the British empire and by interpretations of this medium in categories both related to and tangential to the empire, perhaps we need to collectively reimagine the very category of imperial culture.

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## Studio-Produced India Films Released in Britain, 1917-1948<sup>740</sup>

### 1917

*Each to His Kind* (dir. Jesse L. Lasky, Paramount, U.S.)  
*The Gates of Doom* (dir. Charles Swickard, Universal, U.S.)  
*God's Law and Man's* (dir. John H. Collins, Columbia, U.S.)  
*Lady Barnacle* (dir. John H. Collins, Metro Pictures, U.S.)

### 1918

*The Rose of the World* (dir. Maurice Tourneur, Famous Players-Lasky Corp., U.S.)

### 1919

*For a Woman's Honor* (dir. Park Frame, Jesse D. Hampton Productions, U.S.)  
*Vengeance* (dir. Travers Vale, World Film Corp., U.S.)  
*The Witness for the Defence* (dir. George Fitzmaurice, Paramount-Artcraft Pictures, U.S.)

### 1920

*The Palace of Darkened Windows* (dir. Henry Kolker, National Picture Theaters, Inc., U.S.)  
*The Price of Redemption* (dir. Dallas M. Fitzgerald, Metro Pictures Corporation, U.S.)<sup>741</sup>  
*Stronger Than Death* (dir. Herbert Blanche, Metro Pictures Corporation, U.S.)<sup>742</sup>

### 1921

*The Broken Road* (dir. Rene Plaisetty, Stoll Film Company, Britain)  
*The Indian Love Lyrics* (dir. Joe May, May-Film, Germany)<sup>743</sup>  
*The Tiger of Eschnapur* (dir. Joe May, May-Film, Germany)<sup>744</sup>

### 1922

*A Debt of Honour* (dir. Maurice Elvey, Stoll Film Company, Britain)  
*Dusk to Dawn* (dir. King Vidor, Florence Vidor Productions, U.S.)  
*Lamp in the Desert* (dir. F. Martin Thornton, Stoll Film Company, Britain)

### 1923

*The Indian Love Lyrics* (dir. Sinclair Hill, Stoll Film Company, Britain)

### 1924

*The Shadow of the East* (dir. George Archainbaud, Fox Film Corp. U.S.)

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<sup>740</sup> I have used the primary title by which each film was known in Britain. Where there were alternative titles, I have noted these in a footnote. There are approximately ten additional India films listed in the American Film Institute Catalogue, but because I cannot find any information on whether or not they found release in British cinemas, I have chosen not to include them in this list.

<sup>741</sup> Alternative title: *The Temple of Dawn*.

<sup>742</sup> Alternative title: *The Hermit Doctor of Gaya*.

<sup>743</sup> Alternative title: *Das Indische Grabmal*.

<sup>744</sup> Alternative title: *Der Tiger von Eschnapur*.

*Sushila the Virtuous* (dir. Kanjibhai Rathod, Kohinoor Films, India)<sup>745</sup>  
*Vismi-Sadi* (dir. Homi Master, Kohinoor Films, India)<sup>746</sup>

### **1926**

*The Light of Asia* (dir. Franz Osten, Great Eastern Film Corporation, India)<sup>747</sup>

### **1927**

*My Friend From India* dir. E. Mason Hopper, De Mille Pictures Corp, U.S.)  
*Shiraz* (dir. Franz Osten, Himansu Rai Film, India)<sup>748</sup>  
*Village Girl* (dir. Mohan Bhavnani, Imperial Film Company, India).<sup>749</sup>

### **1928**

*Balaclava* (dir. Maurice Elvey, Gainsborough Pictures, Britain)<sup>750</sup>  
*Emerald of the East* (dir. Jean de Kuharski, British International Pictures, Britain)<sup>751</sup>

### **1929**

*A Throw of Dice* (dir. Franz Osten, Himansu Rai Film, India)<sup>752</sup>  
*The Black Watch* (dir. John Ford, Fox Film Corporation, U.S.)<sup>753</sup>

### **1930**

*Hunting Tigers in India* (dir. G.M. Dyott, Talking Picture Epics, Britain).

### **1931**

*Friends and Lovers* (dir. Victor Schertzinger, RKO Radio Pictures, 1931)<sup>754</sup>  
*Son of India* (dir. Jacques Feyder, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, U.S.)<sup>755</sup>

### **1932**

*Bring 'Em Back Alive!* (dir. Frank Buck, The Van Bueren Corp, U.S.)

### **1934**

*Bombay Mail* (dir. Edwin L. Marin, Universal Pictures Corp. U.S.)  
*Wild Cargo* (dir. Frank Buck, The Van Bueren Corp, U.S.)

### **1935**

*Bonnie Scotland* (dir. James W. Horne, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, U.S.)<sup>756</sup>

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<sup>745</sup> Alternative title: *Triumph of the Truth* and *Sadguni Sushila*.

<sup>746</sup> Alternative titles: *Bismi Sadi* and *Twentieth Century*.

<sup>747</sup> Alternative titles: *Prem Sanyas* and *Die Leuchte Asiens*.

<sup>748</sup> Alternative title: *Das Grabmal Einer Grossen Liebe*.

<sup>749</sup> Alternative title: *Gamdani Gori*.

<sup>750</sup> Alternative titles: *Jaws of Hell* and *The Charge of the Light Brigade*.

<sup>751</sup> Alternative title: *Das Herz des Maharadscha*.

<sup>752</sup> Alternative title: *Pranpanch Pash* and *Schicksalwürfel*.

<sup>753</sup> Alternative title: *King of the Khyber Rifles*.

<sup>754</sup> Alternative title: *Sphinx has Spoken*

<sup>755</sup> Alternative title: *Son of the Rajah*.

<sup>756</sup> Alternative title: *Heroes of the Regiment*

*Clive of India* (dir. Richard Boleslawski, Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation, U.S.)

*Fang and Claw* (dir. Frank Buck, The Van Bueren Corp., U.S.)

*The Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (dir. Henry Hathaway, Paramount Pictures, U.S.)

### **1936**

*The Charge of the Light Brigade* (dir. Michael Curtiz, Warner Brothers, U.S.)

### **1937**

*Elephant Boy* (dir. Robert Flaherty and Zoltan Korda, London Film Productions, Britain)

*Wee Willie Winkie* (dir. John Ford, Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation, U.S.)

### **1938**

*The Drum* (dir. Zoltan Korda, London Film Productions, Britain)<sup>757</sup>

*Four Men and a Prayer* (dir. John Ford, Twentieth Century-Fox, U.S.)

*Storm Over Bengal* (dir. Sidney Salkow, Republic Pictures Corp, U.S.)

### **1939**

*Gunga Din* (dir. George Stevens, RKO Radio Pictures, U.S.)

*The Rains Came* (dir. Clarence Brown, Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corp., U.S.)

### **1942**

*Rudyard Kipling's The Jungle Book* (dir. Zoltan Korda, London Films Corp, Britain)

### **1948**

*Black Narcissus* (dir. Michael Powell, Archers Film Productions, Britain)

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<sup>757</sup> Alternative title: *Drums*.

## **British Newsreels about Gandhi and the Indian Independence Movement, 1922-1948**

### **1922**

30 March 1922: “Gandhi” (Pathé)

28 December 1922: “Look Back on 1922” (Pathé)

### **1923**

19 February 1923: “Native Leaders Demand Independence of India” (Gaumont Graphic)

11 April 1923: “Pictures of India’s Martyrdom” (Gaumont Graphic)

### **1929**

3 March 1929: “Now What’s All This About” (Pathé)

### **1930**

1 January 1930: “Gandhi Starts Civil Disobedience Campaign” (Gaumont Graphic)<sup>758</sup>

1 January 1930: “Indian Protestors in Bombay Call for Complete Independence from Britain” (Gaumont Graphic)

1 January 1930: “India: Bombay Demonstrations Begin Gandhi Campaign of Civil Disobedience” (Gaumont Graphic)

12 June 1930: “Huge Anti-British Demonstration Demanding Gandhi’s Release” (Gaumont Graphic)

10 July 1930: “Bombay Boycott Parade” (British Movietone)

8 September 1930: “Turbulent Scenes of Bombay Riots” (British Movietone)

22 September 1930: “New Pictures of Bombay Riots, Police Charge Mobs” (British Movietone)

### **1931**

1 January, 1931: “Mahatma Gandhi Arrives in Britain for Round Table Conference” (Gaumont Graphic)

9 April 1931: “Gandhi Greeted by Hysterical Crowd” (British Movietone)

1 June 1931: “Gandhi is Persuaded to Talk” (British Movietone)

14 February 1931: “Hush Hush Publicity on Gandhi’s Journey” (British Movietone)

14 September 1931: “Gandhi is—here!” (Pathé)

15 September 1931: “England: Mr. Gandhi Arrives for Round Table Conference” (British Paramount)

17 September 1931: “In the Limelight” (British Paramount)

24 September 1931: “Charlie Meets Gandhi” (Pathé)

28 September 1931: “Gandhi in Lancashire Sees for Himself”

29 September 1931: “Gandhi in Lancashire” (British Paramount)

7 December 1931: “Gandhi Starts his Homeward Trek” (British Movietone)

10 December 1931: “Gandhi India Bound” (British Paramount)

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<sup>758</sup> These dates come from the newsreel archive companies, and some seem to be inaccurate. A newsreel on January 1 about Gandhi’s arrival in Britain would have been impossible since he did not arrive in London until September. In spite of their faults, I have, however, used the archives dating here and in the footnotes to my second chapter.

- 17 December 1931: "Gandhi Going Home" (British Paramount)  
 17 December 1931: "Gandhi Nearer India" (British Paramount)

### **1932**

- 18 January 1932: "How India Greeted Gandhi's Return" (British Movietone)  
 21 January 1932: "Indian Unrest Grows" (British Paramount)  
 1 February 1932: "Riots Disturb India" (British Paramount)

### **1936**

- 1 June 1936: "Indian Extremist Whips Up Bombay" (British Movietone)

### **1942**

- 7 April 1942: "Sir Stafford Cripps in India" (Pathé)  
 3 September 1942: "The Trouble in India" (Pathé)  
 3 September 1942: "India Checks Mass Disobedience Riots" (British Movietone)

### **1946**

- 16 March 1946: "Leaders of the Indian Nationalist Movement Come to Viceregal Lodge for Conference" (Gaumont British)  
 16 May 1946: "Simla Conference Fails" (British Movietone)  
 3 October 1946: "Congress Session in Dehli" (British Movietone)  
 11 November 1946: "Rioting in Kolkata (formally Calcutta)" (Gaumont British)  
 30 December 1946: "Review of the Year 1946" (Pathé)

### **1947**

- No Date: "Summing Up No. 3" (Pathé)  
 10 April 1947: "Mountbatten Sworn in and Sees Gandhi" (British Movietone)  
 18 September 1947: "Calcutta Peace Mission—Gandhi's Miracle" (British Movietone)  
 18 September 1947: "Gandhi Fasts for 73 Hours in Peace Mission for Calcutta" (Gaumont British)  
 29 December 1947: "Review of the Year 1947" (British Movietone)

### **1948**

- No Date: "Summing Up No. 7—Reel 1" (Pathé)  
 26 January 1948: "Citizens of India Observe Gandhi During his Long Fast" (Gaumont British)  
 26 January 1948: "Gandhi Breaks his Fast" (Pathé)  
 26 January 1948: "Gandhi's Fast Ends" (British Movietone)  
 30 January 1948: "Mahatma Gandhi Assassinated" (Gaumont British)  
 2 February 1948: "Gandhi Assassinated" (British Movietone)  
 2 February 1948: "Gandhi Dead" (Pathé)  
 5 February 1948: "London Indians Pay Homage to Gandhi" (British Movietone)  
 9 February 1948: "Millions Mourn Gandhi" (Gaumont British)  
 9 February 1948: "Funeral of Gandhi" (Pathé)  
 9 February 1948: "Funeral of Mahatma Gandhi" (British Movietone)

19 February 1948: "Last Rites for Gandhi" (Pathé)

19 February 1948: "Gandhi's Ashes Born to Holy River" (British Movietone)