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Media wars: Remaking the logics of propaganda in India's wartime cine-ecologies

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Abstract

Recent Second World War historiography has rightly highlighted the forgotten contributions of South Asia in the Allied war effort, and the everyday meanings of the war in South Asia. The role of cinema here, however, remains largely overlooked. This article focuses on British efforts to produce war propaganda in India with the help of Indian filmmakers, through varying tactics of incentivization and coercion. Between 1940 and 1945, the British colonial administration attempted several strategies to build a local film propaganda apparatus in India but, as I demonstrate, each stage was met with differentiated forms of cooperation, reluctance, and outright refusal, finally leading to the adoption of the unlikely genre of the full-length fiction film as the main mode of war propaganda in India. Derided as frivolous and half-hearted by critics at the time, the Indian-language 'war effort' film is more generatively framed as a form of 'useless cinema' that defied the logics of propaganda and privileged ideological ambivalence. This article brings together media history, film analysis, industrial debates about supply chains and licence regimes, aesthetic concerns about subtlety, and political differences about the ideological meanings of the war to situate the Second World War within the complex cine-ecologies of India. I read films and film industrial negotiations together to add to the multi-sited story of India's experience of the Second World War that this special issue develops.

Keywords: Media; cinema; propaganda; documentary; Panna; Burma Rani

Media wars: Remaking the logics of propaganda in India's wartime cine-ecologies

Cinema has deep historical entanglements with the politics, techniques, and experience of modern warfare. As wartime entertainment, as military propaganda, as a medium for the transfer of intelligence, and as an infrastructure of storage, retrieval, circulation, and surveillance, film served many roles in the Allied war effort. 'Thinking with the war' affords the media historian new ways of approaching the dispersed object that is cinema; and, simultaneously, 'thinking with film' affords the war his-

Figure 1. Advertisement for Virginia No. 10 cigarettes, 1946. *Source: Times of India*, 20 May 1946.

torian new axes to assess the experience of the Second World War in the life of colonial India. I therefore want to begin with an image—an image not from a film, but of a certain experience of what it meant to inhabit cinema as film culture during wartime.

   This image (Figure 1) is from an advertisement for Virginia No. 10 cigarettes, published in Bombay's English-language newspapers in 1946. It shows a queue outside a movie theatre. One man turns around and accepts a cigarette from the man standing behind him. There is a warmth in his smile, even though the two are strangers. The advert seeks to underline the overlaps between cinema and cigarettes, affective commodities imbued with wartime meanings in a time of shortages, and everyday coping mechanisms in times of anxiety. The text accompanying the advert underlines some of these connections, cleverly drawing on urban memories of the war and rendering these as nostalgia:

Overture to Friendship

Admittedly waiting in queues has become part and parcel of our wartime life—even when it's a question of buying cinema tickets. The prospect of a long wait, however, isn't exactly enjoyable. Then after lighting your favourite cigarette, Virginia No. 10, on an impulse you offer one to the man waiting next to you. It immediately serves as a link of fellow-feeling, you talk over this and that, and the weary wait turns out to be a pleasant interlude of friendliness.[1]

In this article I consider the ways in which cinema was mobilized by the British government in the India theatre of the Second World War as a military and ideological tool, and the simultaneous arena of negotiation and local resistance that was produced in the process. Cinema in India, by the 1940s, had become a prominent feature of urban life in India's big cities and a medium through which the volatility of the present could be interpreted. As the advert acknowledges, going to the movies also engendered a new form of community, an anonymous collective of individuals who were viewed with great excitement and some trepidation by powerful interests who sought to exploit this emerging audience for commercial or political gain.[2] Cinema's ability to engineer mass affect, particularly feelings of 'friendliness' and solidarity, were especially attractive to British war publicists and propagandists in India who sought ways to address 'the greatest marketing challenge of all: how to convince a mass of people who no longer accept your sovereignty to lay down their lives for you?'.[3]

Propaganda experts, from Berlin to London, recognized that cinema was a popular mass form that would be critical to mounting a cultural, ideological, and information drive to stir public enthusiasm, spread propaganda, and transmit images of strength and victory. From a British perspective, the colonies were key locations for propaganda because of the acute need for human and infrastructural resources. Indeed, recent historiography on the Second World War in South Asia highlights the significance of India's under-studied contributions, most spectacularly seen in the two million Indian soldiers who contributed to the largest 'volunteer army' in history.[4] Forgotten and overlooked in retrospective celebrations of the Allied victory against fascism is the fact, as Yasmin Khan reminds us, that 'Britain did not fight the second world war, the British empire did'.[5] Looking back at this massive historical mobilization from

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[1] *Times of India*, 20 May 1946, p. 5.

[2] The emergence of cinema as a mass form of entertainment and pedagogy almost immediately raised issues about contagion, indoctrination, and revolution for commentators and observers interested in populist politics, theories of crowds, and strategies for mass mobilization or suppression. For a well-known strain of this interest, see the early critical thinkers of the Frankfurt School.

[3] William Mazzarella opens his article on Second World War propaganda and the contradictions of mobilizing affect versus asserting sovereignty with this dramatic question. See William Mazzarella, 'A torn performative dispensation: the affective politics of British Second World War propaganda in India and the problem of legitimation in an age of mass publics', *South Asian History and Culture*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2010, pp. 1–24.

[4] Yasmin Khan notes that British war propaganda 'regularly reminded the world [that] this was a "volunteer army" not raised by conscription'. Yasmin Khan, *India at War: The Subcontinent and the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 22.

[5] Ibid., p. xiii.

the fragmented archives of Indian cinemas, we see not only the panics and under-preparedness of the British government in India, but also an archive of local civilian sentiments that ranged from indifference to hostility. Yet, these sentiments cannot be chalked up to a convenient tale of something approaching a nationalist filmic rebellion or cinematic anticolonialism. Rather, as recent Second World War historiography cautions, we might be better positioned to understand India's myriad experiences of, and contributions to, the war if we avoid the polar narratives of resistance versus collaboration.[6]

Cinema in interwar India rapidly emerged as a cheap and popular form of urban mass entertainment. Through the intrepid entrepreneurship of private touring companies, films were also exhibited in rural and semi-urban locales.[7] If the war was to be won by first winning over 'hearts and minds', then the cine-ecologies of British India offered several strategic advantages, first among them being the already existing film production, distribution, and exhibition infrastructure that had been steadily expanding across the subcontinent since the 1920s. I use the term 'cine-ecology' to indicate the networked assemblage of film production, image circulation, industrial associations, film journalism, stardom, built environments such as theatres, and viewer discourse that shape the meanings of cinema in a particular time-space. As I have outlined elsewhere, the 1930s was a time of critical consolidation for India's multiple film cultures and cine-ecologies. Coming at the close of this decade of rapid transformation, the Second World War was well-timed to tap into these proliferating film energies. The fact that India's filmmakers (and viewers) did not respond to Britain's militarized call with either enthusiasm or submission constitutes a fascinating chapter in the history of the war.

Cinema made its first foray into South Asia in 1896 when the Lumiere Brothers' short films were screened at Bombay's Watson Hotel. Soon, this new visual form spread way beyond the exclusive confines of European hotels and into the *maidans* and live performance spaces of the city as Indian entrepreneurs imported and invented equipment for filming and projection. By the late 1920s many of the subcontinent's metropolitan centres, from Calcutta and Lahore to Madras and Kolhapur, had set up film production centres and India emerged as a globally significant site of indigenous filmmaking. Hollywood cinema, with its massive distribution and exhibition networks, was still the most watched film form at this time, but its hegemony in the Indian film market was threatened in the 1930s with the local transition to talkie films. As Indian films started to 'talk', audiences were finally able to hear film characters speaking in native tongues. Bengali, Hindustani, Tamil, and Marathi were some of the earliest filmic languages to be tried out. It is no surprise, therefore, that when the British colonial administration realized that it was imperative to produce war propaganda for and in India, it turned to the already existing local cine-ecologies for help. As with many other industries, filmmakers in India primarily experienced the war as a series

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[6]See Indivar Kamtekar, 'The shiver of 1942', *Studies in History*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2002, pp. 81–102; Srinath Raghavan, *India's War: World War II and the making of Modern South Asia* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

[7]Valuable accounts of travelling and touring cinemas are currently available in Sudhir Mahadevan, *A Very Old Machine: The Many Origins of the Cinema in India* (New York: SUNY Press, 2015); Ranita Chatterjee, 'Journeys in and beyond the city: cinema in Calcutta, 1897–1939', PhD thesis, University of Westminster, 2011.
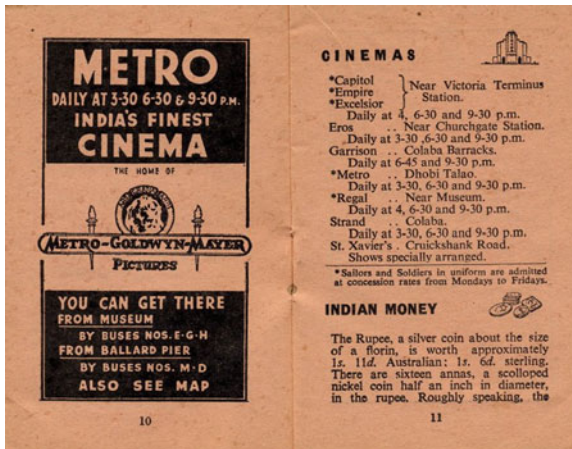
Figure 2. A list of movie theatres for newly arrived Allied troops in Bombay from an informational booklet prepared by the Bombay Hospitality Committee, CBI Theater, 1943. *Source:* Family of CBI veteran John Sunne. Available online at https://cbi-theater.com/bombay/bombay.html, [accessed 28 April 2023].

of delays and deprivations, thanks to the strict rationing of supplies, delays in imported shipments, and overall diversion of infrastructural resources towards the war effort. Because celluloid itself was an imported commodity, the basic raw material of cinema became a scarce wartime resource strictly rationed by the British government. This scarcity enabled a 'cinematic military industrial complex'[8] wherein multiple players, including film producers, equipment dealers, celluloid manufacturers, film distributors and exhibitors, technocrats, military training units, intelligence agencies, and assorted 'sarkari babus' were brought together in a culture of negotiation, contestation, and coercion. Tracking the everyday and eventic negotiations between military authorities, filmmakers, audiences, the colonial administration, and film commentators helps us map a sprawling ecology of wartime cinema that includes theatrical commercial films, propaganda shorts, infrastructures of distribution and exhibition, 'celluloid geopolitics', and the constitution of temporary, shifting wartime audiences (see Figure 2).

On the other hand, India's cine-ecologies also got a financial shot in the arm during the war years. More cash flowed into urban economies as industrial manufacturing increased alongside black marketeering. The huge numbers of troops, Indian and foreign, that occupied India's port cities and military training centres were matched by factory workers, porters, reporters, vendors, and performers who also contributed to the war economy. *The Handbook of the Indian Film Industry* notes that 'The demand for motion picture entertainment increased several fold from the Armed Forces as well as the general public',[9] leading to a mad scramble to produce cheaper, faster, and

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[8]I borrow this apt formulation from Haidee Wasson and Lee Grieveson, *Cinema's Military Industrial Complex* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2018).

[9]I. K. Menon, 'History of Film Industry in India', in I. K. Menon and S. G. Chandavarkar (eds), *Handbook of the Indian Film Industry* (Bombay: Motion Picture Society of India, 1949), p. xxiii.

light-hearted pictures. In fact, the gross income of the film industry 'went from about Rs. 4 crores in 1940–41 to about Rs. 13 crores in 1945–46'.[10] While histories of Indian cinema typically focus on the post-independence years, the war years are mainly noted for the influx of fly-by-night film financiers and the rise of freelance acting. The Second World War, thus, has come to emblematize the end of the 'studio era', in a nostalgic teleology. Rethinking the relation of Indian cinema and the Second World War offers us new ways of understanding the object we call film, its dispersed nature and its varied uses. It also allows the post-colonial media historian to unpack moments of collaboration, ideological opposition, and industrial resistance within this dispersed cine-ecology.

In what follows, I survey the historical imbrications of Indian cinema with British military-imperial ambitions and the steady rejection of these ambitions by India's filmmakers, a group with heterogeneous political, commercial, and aesthetic beliefs. Starting with a discussion of the formative links between cinema and war, I outline the different institutional arrangements pursued by the British colonial administration to promote filmic war propaganda with an Indian flavour.[11] From the Colonial Film Unit to the Film Advisory Board to the Information Films of India, a series of failed experiments saw the colonial government steadily adopting coercion as their chief strategy with regard to film propaganda, rather than collaboration. I lay out a history of these institutions, describe their filmic output, and argue that Indian filmmakers responded to growing coercion with a drift towards a desultory and, indeed, *useless* form of film product that could not perform the work of efficient propaganda. I look at negotiations and debates about what film propaganda ought to look like—should it be short nonfiction or feature-length film, direct or discreet—to revisit assumptions about a one-way imposition of formal-ideological standards by the colonial documentary apparatus. As the colonial administration promised extra raw stock allocation and easy attainment of censor certificates or tried to impose harsher punishments for non-compliance, the field of film propaganda production and circulation became an arena of major contestation, with each side trying to wrest maximum gains with minimal ideological or commercial compromise. Indian film industrial stakeholders first persuaded the British administrators to abandon the documentary form in favour of fictional feature films, and then produced half-hearted content with the only discernible aim being steady production so as to keep the studios running. In these frequently inexplicable, even illegible, practices I read traces of tactical manoeuvring and refusal. Collectively, they give us fresh insights into how to think about cinema and politics in the war years.

Cinema, propaganda, and public morale

Film, in 1939, was a critical military medium, a tool for surveillance and reconnaissance that was irreversibly intertwined with weapons of mass destruction. It is worth

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[10]Ibid.

[11]For a detailed survey of some of these institutional histories with respect to colonial film efforts in India, see Ravi Vasudevan, 'Official and Amateur: Exploring Information Film in India, 1920s–40s', in Lee Grieveson and Colin MacCabe (eds), *Film and the End of Empire* (London: BFI-Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 73–94.

recalling that the 'military's cinema complex', to borrow an ironic phrase from Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson, runs deep. The world's most powerful militaries had worked with film from the moment of its invention. British, German, and American defence forces used cinema to make military training films, recruitment films, and morale-boosting propaganda. Apart from these forms of filmic storytelling, a vast quantity of film was used for 'aerial and underwater reconnaissance and mapping, operating manuals, tactical support to combat missions, immersive gunnery training, battle-front briefs, research and development, munitions testing, and data recording and analysis'.[12] In one of the first theoretical exegeses of the connection between cinema and war, Paul Virilio tracks technological innovations in camera design, film speed, and modes of transportation to argue that the First World War 'laid the ground for a veritable *logistics of military perception*, in which a supply of images would become the equivalent of an ammunition supply'.[13] The assemblage of camera, plane, and missile thus became both formidable and necessary, for without a 'sight machine'[14] it is impossible for reconnaissance experts to mark out targets and for fighter pilots to apprehend said targets. This martial alliance of visual technologies and weapons should give us pause as we set out to consider exactly what a view from the fields of film and media history brings to our understanding of the Second World War in India.[15]

Another historical relationship to pursue is cinema's foundational link with modern imperialism. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam note that,

> the most prolific film-producing countries of the silent period—Britain, France, the US, Germany—also 'happened' to be among the leading imperialist counties, in whose clear interest it was to laud the colonial enterprise. The cinema emerged exactly at the point when enthusiasm for the imperial project was spreading beyond the elites into the popular strata, partly thanks to popular fictions and exhibitions.[16]

From early actuality footage of imperial spectacles such as the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1897 and the Delhi Durbar of 1903, to documentary scenes and re-enactments of the Spanish-American war, early cinema found a new purpose as a purveyor of spectacle, action, and imperial propaganda. Propaganda is a form of persuasion that depends on the mass dissemination of ideologically saturated messaging; in fact, the more a message circulates, the more it accrues in propagandist force. Media and mass communication technologies are therefore a fundamental infrastructure of propaganda and often, as Marshall McLuhan informed us, the medium is also the message. Celebrations of 'War Week' that depended on impressive parades and displays of

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[12]Grieveson and Wasson, *Cinema's Military Industrial Complex*, p. 2.

[13]Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, (trans.) Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 1989), p. 1.

[14]Ibid., p. 3.

[15]For more on the historical relation between media and war, see Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, (trans) Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); James Der Derian, *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-industrial-media-entertainment-network* (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2009).

[16]Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2013; reprint), p. 100.

uniforms, weapons, and war machines, and mass media forms such as posters, books, handbills, radio, exhibitions, parades, and films at once delivered and *embodied* propaganda as visions of technological modernity.[17] Through paintings, plays, romance novels, and movies, British schoolboys could conjure up empire as a space for personal adventure, while Indian schoolboys gustily cheered on white American frontier heroes as they routed the indigenous 'brute'.[18] By the 1940s, the narrativization of Britain's imperative to shoulder the 'administration of backward peoples'[19] informed all bureaucratic communications and became critical to Britain's hold over India as well as its maintenance of legitimacy with its powerful ally, the United States.

India entered into the Second World War in September 1939. In an abrupt announcement on 3 September 1939, Viceroy Linlithgow announced India's participation in Britain's war on Germany. Indian nationalist leaders, many of whom had recently won major victories in provincial elections, were enraged by the imperiousness of the announcement; Indians themselves had not been adequately consulted. Prominent Congress politicians immediately rejected Britain's propaganda line that this was Britain's war to save democracy.[20] After all, was it not obvious that a fading imperial power determined to hang on to its vast colonies could not claim to be a champion of freedom? It is precisely the job of propaganda to put a spin on the obvious and produce new hegemonic narratives. This was a war without popular consent from the people of India, and from the outset the main battle being fought on the India front was one of 'winning hearts and minds'.

As colonial India's elaborate wartime administrative apparatus was gradually built up, propaganda emerged as its beating heart, directed not only at recruitment efforts but to also engineer mass consent for a regime of enforced shortages and deprivations. The war pledge crafted by India's National War Front (NWF) underlined the critical importance of faith and morale: 'I solemnly pledge myself to stamp out defeatism and suppress alarmist rumor, to face and defy every peril threatening India's national honor and security and work day by day in sure and certain hope of victory.'[21] Local officials frequently reminded civilians that their war 'work' consisted in combating rumours, 'plough[ing] the earth and turn[ing] the lathe', work that was 'worth every bit as much as driving a tank or manning a gun'.[22] Thus, 'keeping up the morale' of

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[17]You can watch a clip of a British Movietone newsreel on the 'Bombay Weapons War Week' from 1944 here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mY08cuiDDs4, [accessed 28 March 2023].

[18]See Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, p. 100; J. B. H. Wadia describes his childhood love for Westerns, which were a hugely popular genre in 1920s–1930s India, in his unpublished memoirs 'Those Were the Days'.

[19]Draft letter D. Scott to Radcliffe (Ministry of Information), September 1942, FO371/30659, cited in Sarah Ellen Graham, 'American propaganda, the Anglo-Indian alliance, and the "delicate question" of Indian self-determination', *Diplomatic History*, vol. 33, no. 2, April 2009, pp. 223–259.

[20]For detailed historical background on how the war played out in India, see the rest of this special issue. Also: Khan, *India at War*; Raghavan, *India's War*. For a specific look at the use of media propaganda in India and the problem of British colonial legitimacy, see Mazzarella, 'A torn performative dispensation', pp. 1–24.

[21]Pledge reproduced in: P. Priya, 'Fighting your master's war: British war propaganda strategy, mobilisation and recruitment in Malabar (1939–45)', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 73, 2012, pp. 647–657, footnote 45. Multiple national war fronts were launched in the different provinces.

[22]From a radio broadcast by the governor of Bengal quoted in the *Times of India*, 12 May 1942, p. 4. For more on the role and control of rumour during the war, see Khan, *India at War*.

troops, auxiliary services, and civilians was of utmost importance. As Urvashi Gautam underlines, 'In a state of total war, which required civilians to participate in the war effort, morale came to be recognised as a significant military factor, and propaganda [...] emerged as the principal instrument of control over public opinion and as an essential weapon in the national arsenal.'[23]

During the First World War, Britain's approach to propaganda had focused mainly on the domestic audience. By the mid-1930s, a growing anti-imperial consciousness across European colonies and in metropolitan politics made the need for India-centric propaganda more urgent. At the start of the Second World War, a Colonial Film Unit (CFU) was set up in London, a subset of the Ministry of Information, its mission to produce and distribute films that would mobilize colonial support for the war.[24] Notably, India was beyond the purview of the CFU. This was largely due to the India Office's acknowledgment of the fact that Indian film audiences were likely to agitate against British-made propaganda films. For more than two decades the India Office had been petitioned by angry viewers, religious leaders, journalists, and politicians who objected to sensitive content in both Indian and foreign films, and those who sought the proscription of films that were racially offensive to Indians.[25] A vibrant and heterogeneous film audience was in place by the late 1930s, one that recognized the social effects of mass media and treated cinema as a site of political protest.

From 1929 onwards, Hollywood had voluntarily cheered on Britain's imperial authority through a set of lavish, star-studded spectaculars that are known as Hollywood's 'empire films' (see Figure 3). These films romanticized imperial conquest in tales of exotic and erotic adventure, framing Asian and African colonies as venues for the white man's supposedly burdensome but heroic civilizing work.[26] One of the reasons why Hollywood took on this empire-cheering project was because 50 per cent of its overseas revenues came from Britain, which had one of the highest densities of film theatres in the world as well as an active filmgoing public. In India, these empire films became the centre of tense agitations. Audiences were offended by Orientalist stereotypes of Indians—from subservient sepoys (*Gunga Din*, 1939) to evil Muslim tyrants (*The Drum*, 1938). Under newly elected provincial Congress governments, the Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras censor boards banned many of these empire films. By 1939, therefore, even though the British colonial government felt the urgency of producing political propaganda films for India, it was wary of local sentiment. Filmgoers in India, at least those who repeatedly appeared in the documents of the Home Department, constituted a vocal and radicalized group. Little wonder then that the India Office believed that any war propaganda directed at Indian viewers would have to be manufactured with *Indian* collaborators.

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[23]Urvashi Gautam, 'Image of the enemy: German and British propaganda in the Second World War', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 73, 2012, pp.1109–1106, here p. 1109.

[24]One of its first actions was to acquire mobile cinema vans for Britain's African colonies. For a book-length study of the CFU, see Tom Rice, *Film for the Colonies: Cinema and the Preservation of the British Empire* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2019).

[25]For a detailed and fascinating history of anticolonial, anti-racist, and anti-Islamophobic resistance to Hollywood's cultural imperialism, see Prem Chowdhry, *Colonial India and the Making of Empire Cinema: Image, Ideology and Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

[26]Ibid.

Figure 3. Poster for the controversial Hollywood film *Gunga Din* (George Stevens, 1939), produced by RKO Radio Pictures. *Source:* Author's collection.

Uneasy alliance: The Film Advisory Board (1940–1943)

In July 1940 the British Ministry of Information and the Government of India set up the Film Advisory Board (FAB), a decision-making collaborative body that sought to bring together Indian and British film interests. Its formal goal was 'to advise the Government of India on war publicity through the medium of the film and to assist in the production, importation, and distribution of suitable films'.[27] Its headquarters were located in Bombay—'as the most convenient center'—with invitations sent to filmmakers in Calcutta, Madras, Delhi, and Lahore.[28] Mr Desmond Young, chief press adviser to the Government of India (GoI) at this time, explained that the FAB was founded on the recognition that the GoI needed 'the assistance of the brains and experience of those who were actively engaged in the industry itself'.[29] Local film practitioners were to help the government make commercially viable war propaganda, dub imported war shorts, and produce specialized training films for the Indian defence forces. These films would be used not only for local audiences, but select films would be exported overseas 'securing much needed publicity for India in other parts

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[27] *Times of India*, 5 July 1940, p. 8; *Bombay Chronicle*, 5 July 1940, p. 8.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.

of the world, especially Britain, the Dominions, and America'.[30] These export films would 'project a modern and progressive India under British rule to audiences abroad, particularly the United States'.[31]

India's multiple film sectors now found themselves in a real dilemma. Industry leaders and commentators had been fighting a long battle for industrial recognition, indeed industrial legitimacy, since the 1920s. Thus far, colonial interest in the local film trade had been limited to censorship and surveillance of potentially anticolonial content. In 1928, the Indian Cinematograph Committee (ICC), a major fact-finding committee, surveyed the Indian film economy with an eye on the censorship of imported films that could 'hurt imperial prestige'. Faced with an outspoken set of Indian filmmakers who felt slighted by the government, the ICC produced a comprehensive report recommending direct governmental aid in film infrastructural development and financing. These recommendations were ignored. Since then, the pervasive feeling in the film trade had been that all 'aspirations towards progress and development have been checkmated time and again by Government more than anything else'.[32] The war exacerbated many of these concerns. Raw stock, including film negatives and positive stock for print duplication, was not manufactured in India and had to be imported.[33] By then the popular German film brand, Agfa, was completely unavailable. Kodak film supply, from the United States, was affected by cargo restrictions, and British Ilford film stock was being used either for surveillance purposes or rationed on a priority basis to the military and war publicity departments. Getting hold of film for commercial purposes was extremely challenging. An industry representative calculated that 'not less than 38%' of the gross income of the entire film business in British India was being usurped in myriad wartime taxes and duties.[34] Even though the government wanted Indian filmmakers to contribute to the war effort with propaganda films, taxes were imposed on the very means that were necessary to transport, publicize, and screen said films: rail freight, paper, electricity, carbon. The Defence of India Act was invoked to reduce the number of film screenings in order to save electricity,[35] and enforce black-outs and curfews in the big cities, all of which cut to the heart of the film business, a sector that

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[30]*Times of India*, 23 January 1941, p. 6.

[31]B. D. Garga, *From Raj to Swaraj: The Non-fiction Film in India* (Delhi: Penguin Books, 2007). Several articles and books now exist on the nonfiction output of the Films Division of India which was established in 1948. Some of these are helpful for tracing a pre-history of the Indian documentary form back to Second World War film propaganda. For example: Sanjit Narwekar, *Films Division and the Indian Documentary* (Mumbai: Government of India, 1992); Anuja Jain, 'The curious case of the Films Division: some annotations on the beginnings of Indian documentary cinema in post-independence India, 1940s–1960s', *The Velvet Light Trap*, vol. 71, 2013, pp. 15–26; Camille Deprez, 'The Films Division of India, 1948–1964: the early days and the influence of the British documentary film tradition', *Film History: An International Journal*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2013, pp. 149–173.

[32]Speech by Khan Bahadur Gulamhoosein at the Annual General Meeting of the Federation of the Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry held at New Delhi on 4 March 1944, excerpted in A. Dossani, 'Taxation of the Indian film industry', *Journal of the Film Industry*, March 1944, p. 5.

[33]On the politics of raw stock rationing during the Second World War, see Ravi Vasudevan, 'The cultural space of a film narrative: interpreting kismet (Bombay talkies, 1943)', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 28, no. 2, 1991, pp. 171–185, and Priya Jaikumar, *Where Histories Reside* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019).

[34]'Duty on raw films', *Journal of the Film Industry*, December 1942, p. 5.

[35]See 'Control of electricity', *Journal of the Film Industry*, December 1942, p. 6.

relied heavily on night-time film attendance. In 1944, there were only 1,700 cinema theatres across India (permanent plus travelling) for a population of 400 million. While theatre attendance saw record highs during the war years, exhibitors found it impossible to build more theatres because of the restrictions on essential building materials like cement, steel, and concrete.[36] All of these factors stymied filmmakers' efforts to shoot and screen films at a pace that matched the heightened wartime demand for theatrical content.

The self-appointed leaders of the film business in India decided that a solution to governmental neglect was to position cinema as a dynamic 'national industry', one that brought in considerable revenue for the British Exchequer and could play a vital role in the war effort.[37] At the same time, filmmakers also wooed politicized audience demographics by asserting that this was a defiantly *swadeshi* industry, run by indigenous finance, personnel, and content. These contradictions, between currying colonial favour and asserting nationalist self-reliance, came to a head when the colonial government decided that it needed local support to make war propaganda. The FAB's call to Indian filmmakers was not only an attempt to exploit a ready-made resource infrastructure for the production, distribution, and circulation of propaganda films, but also a ploy to enlist public support by using a popular local entertainment industry to navigate the volatile politics of the day. The launch of the FAB thus became a thorny problem because here was the colonial administration finally asking the film industry to deliver on its industrial promise of national production, but the popular mood was clearly on another track. Acutely aware of the indifferent-to-hostile attitudes of nationalist Indians to the war effort, given the Congress's defiant stance, the government heavily incentivized propaganda film production. Raw film stock was rationed out to a select group of producers under a newly instituted licence regime.[38] Censor certificates, essential for theatrical exhibition, were also withheld unless producers cooperated. This selective licence regime instituted a temporary phase of governmental nepotism, wherein only a select group of powerful Bombay studios managed to cash in on state incentives. From 1940–1943, the FAB commissioned several war propaganda shorts, between eight and 12 minutes long, produced by prominent studios such as Wadia Movietone, National Studios, and Bombay Talkies under varying levels of colonial supervision.[39]

Chandulal Shah was elected as the first chairperson of the FAB.[40] Shah was a film producer and founder of Ranjit Movitone, one of India's most prolific and successful

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[36]Gulamhoosein in Dossani, 'Taxation of the Indian film industry', p. 6.

[37]For more on the positioning of cinema as a national industry, see Debashree Mukherjee, *Bombay Hustle: Making Movies in a Colonial City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), Chapter 2.

[38]On the broader history of the licence regime, see Indivar Kamtekar, 'The wartime paternity of India's "licence-permit Raj"', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 77, 2016, pp. 403–409.

[39]Studios outside Bombay, such as New Theatres, joined the FAB's efforts by dubbing imported propaganda films from England and Canada. As per official statements, these filmmakers were only compensated for production expenses, though there were other advantages to aiding the colonial government during wartime exigencies, as mentioned above.

[40]'Films about India', *Times of India*, 19 July 1940, p. 2. C. B. Newberry was vice-chairman. Other Bombay filmmakers on the board were Rai Bahadur Chuni Lall (Bombay Talkies), Chimanlal B. Desai (National Studios, previously Sagar), Baburao K. Pai (Prabhat), M. B. Billimoria, J. B. Wadia (Wadia Movietone), M. A. Fazalbhoy, Sohrab Mody (Minerva), Kapurchand Mehta, and Sir Richard Temple (also Bombay Talkies) as well as two Hollywood distributors—A. Rowland-Jones (MGM India) and A. A. Walter (Warner Bros).

film studios. But he resigned in less than three months, citing ill health, and the FAB's short life was henceforth marked by continual instability and controversy. In September 1940, J. B. H. Wadia, of Wadia Movietone, was elected as the new chairperson. In his acceptance speech Wadia stated that as part of an international community 'fully aware of the terrible consequences of a Nazi-Fascist victory in Europe, I will not lag behind in contributing my mite and giving help to a democracy that is putting up a glorious fight to crush this menace and preserve for humanity all that is best in civilisation'.[41] Arguably one of the most enthusiastic members of the FAB, at least among the Bombay film community, Wadia was not just some convenient lackey. In fact, he was a believer in M. N. Roy's internationalist politics and a founder member of the Radical Democratic Party (RDP) which was also instituted in 1940. A former member of the Comintern and a lifelong political maverick, M. N. Roy had joined the Indian National Congress in the late 1930s with the intent of radicalizing the Congress from within. When war broke out in 1939, the Congress declared a policy of non-cooperation with the British war effort. Roy, however, was firmly in support of the Allied effort, with its eye on the larger picture of global solidarity against fascism; he even publicly congratulating the British government on 6 September 1939 'on the decision… to put an end to Hitlerism'.[42] Acts of such 'insubordination' led to Roy's expulsion from the Congress, which is when he and others, such as Wadia, formed the RDP. Thus, Wadia's enthusiastic participation in the filmmaking projects of the war effort, through the Film Advisory Board, sprung from a principled stand and revealed the complex fissures between Indian nationalists and progressives who might at once also be anticolonial. Nevertheless, Wadia's detractors, many of whom were Congress supporters, were further rankled when Wadia was awarded, and accepted, an MBE, becoming a 'Member of the British Empire' in January 1943 for his service to the war effort.[43]

Wadia Movietone produced FAB's first documentaries, including *He's in the Navy* (1940), part of a Royal Indian Navy recruitment drive which proved very successful, though as Richard Osborne notes, 'the war itself barely impinges on the film. It is not mentioned directly, and instead there is talk of "high adventures out at sea".'[44] This aspect shows us another reason, this time not political but narratological, why Wadia took to FAB projects so readily. The studio's priorities lay in creating adventure spectacles for audiences, and a naval recruitment film obviously offered immense opportunities for showcasing thrills. Again, in *Planes of Hindustan* (1940) the Royal Indian Air Force is positioned as a thrilling arena and the short film privileges spectacular adventures such as parachute jumps and sorties as some of the main attractions of life in the Air Force (see Figure 4). The film emphasizes shots of Indian officers, who are pictured as competent and efficient pilots, conspicuously sharing leisure hours with British officers as equals. The stunt film ethos of the Wadia brand is mixed in with proud images of Indian pilots to create a filmic concoction that cannot be easily pinned

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[41]*Times of India*, 23 September 1940, p. 3.

[42]Kris Manjapra and M. N. Roy, *Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2010), pp. 128–129. See also Wadia, 'Those Were the Days'.

[43]Reported in *filmindia*, January 1943, insert.

[44]Online notes by Richard Osborne to accompany the digitized film at http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk/node/2514, [accessed 28 March 2023].
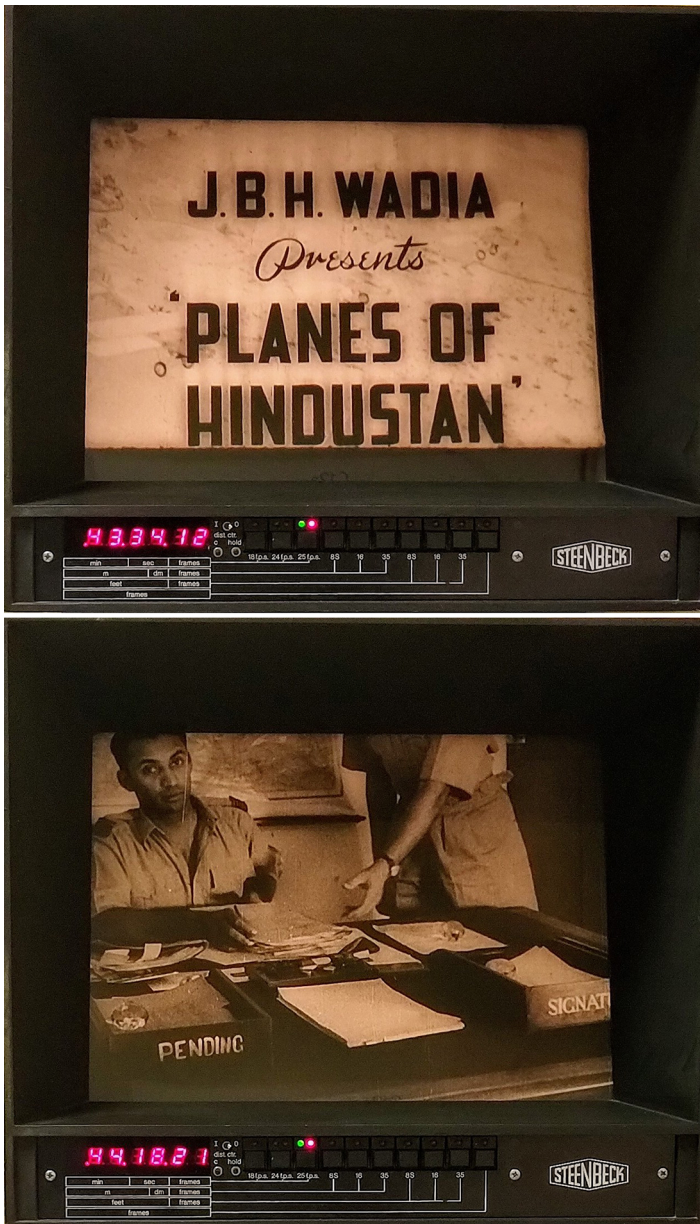
Figure 4(a). *Planes of Hindustan* produced by Wadia Movietone in 1940. **(b)** Looking into the camera is squadron leader Subroto Mukherjee who eventually became India's first chief of air staff. *Source:* Photographs by author.

down in terms of political affinities. We will see a similar cine-ideological ambivalence when we discuss *Burma Rani* later in the article.

The FAB made short films for varying purposes: recruitment films such as *A Day with the Indian Army* (*circa* 1940) and *Defenders of India* (*circa* 1940); military training films like

School for Soldiers shot at the Military Academy in Dehra Dun (*circa* 1940); films warn-ing against the evils of hoarding and rumour-mongering such as *Whispering Legions* (1941); films to boost morale and production such as *India Arms for Victory* (1941); and direct anti-Nazi propaganda such as *Voice of Satan* (1940).[45] All of these films dealt with Indian subjects and were shot in India. The local film press was largely supportive of this opportunity for filmmakers to keep their cameras rolling and reserved their crit-icism for production quality and dramatic value.[46] But more political rumblings were to follow, and by the end of 1940 a British 'adviser', Alexander Shaw, was brought in to supervise the FAB. The government justified Shaw's appointment by citing his experi-ence in making documentary films and, indeed, he had made at least two significant colonial documentaries before he arrived in India—*Five Faces* (1938) in Malaya and *Men of Africa* (1940) in East Africa.[47] It seems that Shaw had a specific mandate—to intro-duce the nation-building and empire-applauding film vision that he had successfully executed in other British colonies. As it turns out, Shaw resigned within ten months, vehemently citing the numerous challenges of working with Indian collaborators, even accusing the Indian crew at FAB of direct sabotage.[48] Shaw claimed that most of the stu-dents, intellectuals, artists, and scientists that he had hoped would be involved with his project had declined to do so because of the Congress's refusal to cooperate with the British in the war effort, and that even Indian filmmakers 'are sitting on the fence, and while willing to please the British, they have one eye on Congress'.[49]

Whether or not Shaw was accurate in his assessment that Indian filmmakers were unitedly loyal to the Congress party line, it is certain that there was ample resentment about an outside 'expert' being brought in to ostensibly school the natives. From the outset, nationalist journals like *filmindia* declared that '[Shaw's] is one of those mysteri-ous appointments which the rulers inflict on the ruled all over the world'.[50] *Picturpost* (Madras) accused the FAB of doing little more than 'provid[ing] a cosy and comfort-able seat with a fat salary for a white man'.[51] Explicitly objecting to the racist attitudes evident in Shaw's hire, these magazines militated in favour of the 'Indianisation'[52] of the FAB and highlighted the apparent contradictions in the British narrative about the war. The popular film critic Baburao Patel asked 'where is the sense in all the talk that is doled out to us about Dominion Status, Democracy, Freedom of Speech etc.',[53] when

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[45]'List of propaganda shorts produced in India upto 1943', *Dipali Year Book 1943*, pp. 37–39.

[46]Film commentators largely maintained a neutral public stance towards the FAB's efforts until the launch of the Quit India movement. See *Bombay Chronicle* coverage, for example, 21 June 1941, p. 10.

[47]Ravi Vasudevan, 'A British documentary film-maker's encounter with empire: the case of Alexander Shaw, 1938–42', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2018, p. 743.

[48]By 1941 two film units working under the FAB had emerged, one headed by Shaw and the other by acclaimed director-producer V. Shantaram. See 'Attack on the Film Advisory Board', *Times of India*, 10 August 1942, p. 4.

[49]Cited in Philip Wood, 'From Shaw to Shantaram: the Film Advisory Board and the making of British propaganda films in India, 1940–1943', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2001, pp. 293–308. J. B. H. Wadia made a public rejoinder to Shaw's complaints, accusing him of petty squabbling 'At a time when the very existence of our democratic civilisation is being threatened by the forces of totalitarian reaction': 'Attack on the Film Advisory Board', *Times of India*, p. 4.

[50]'Agreeable Alex, the mystery man of films', *filmindia*, January 1941, p. 45.

[51]'Matters that matter', *Picturpost,* 31 March 1943, p. 9.

[52]Ibid.

[53]'Stop this waste of public money', *filmindia*, February 1941, p. 19.

in reality arbitrary experts were patronisingly 'dumped on us, without our consent'.[54] Finally, in February 1942, V. Shantaram, a staunch Congress supporter, reluctantly took over the reins of the FAB. For a time *filmindia* was supportive of his work and the improved quality of the films produced under his leadership, some of which seemed to include subtle nationalist messaging. Within months, in August 1942, the Congress launched the Quit India movement and Shantaram resigned from the FAB. It was finally dissolved in 1943.

In the two years that the FAB had functioned, its mission to bring Indian filmmakers on board to collaboratively produce nonfiction propaganda was proven to be naive at best. While many local film entrepreneurs were cautiously optimistic about the chance to experiment with the documentary genre, the combined constraints of budgets, the political compromise required in working with the British government in India, and the knowledge that studio profits lay in commercial feature films rather than short documentaries, ultimately made this a failed experiment. Given the relative absence of government intervention in film production prior to 1939, filmmakers were also over-whelmed by 'red-tapism' and the constant 'wire-pulling either from the Simla or Delhi Gods' in a new regime of licences, cronyism, and obscurantist bureaucracy.[55] As the war decisively moved closer to India, the government also realized that it was imperative to directly control all propaganda production. A new phase now began in the fraught negotiations between Indian filmmakers and the GoI with the launch of Information Films of India (IFI) on 1 February 1943.

Direct versus indirect propaganda: Information Films of India (1943–1946)

India's cine-ecologies contributed to the war effort in several ways. Apart from pro-paganda production, which was a job tasked to only a handful of filmmakers, film exhibitors across the subcontinent were directly called on for support. Exhibitors screened propaganda newsreels at the start of the main feature presentation, and the-atre owners held charity screenings to raise funds for essential services.[56] The British government periodically increased the entertainment tax, cashing in on the upsurge in theatre attendance during the war years. Matters grew worse with the establishment of the IFI which adopted a far more state interventionist policy through compulsory screenings, stricter rationing of celluloid raw stock, and more coercive pressure on local filmmakers. These measures, in turn, incited greater resistance.

As per the Defence of India Act Rule 44-A, instituted in May 1943, every cin-ema theatre in British India was compulsorily required to screen short films and newsreels approved by the Information and Broadcasting Department before each fea-ture programme. These propaganda films were to be no less than 2,000-feet in length (approximately 20 minutes' running time). On 7 August 1943, the Exhibitors group of

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[54] *filmindia*, April 1941, p. 6.

[55] 'Matters that matter', p. 10.

[56] In July 1944, for example, Prakash Pictures and Capitol Theatre arranged a screening of *Ram Rajya* to raise money for the BB and CI Railway War Purposes. See *Times of India*, 28 July 1944, p. 6. Exhibitors regularly held charity shows for the Red Cross, Famine Relief, Troops' Amenities, and the Poppy Fund. See 'An unfair order', *filmindia*, February 1944, p. 9. Many complained that these so-called charity screenings were forced on them by local authorities.

the Motion Picture Society of India sent a letter to the government expressing their complete lack of confidence in the war propaganda short film *as a genre and a format*: 'War propaganda has been more effectively carried on from Russia to America by full length feature films rather than through short films. A further compulsion of 2000 ft of approved shorts is therefore unnecessary.'[57] If anyone was familiar with the range and quality of films entering India, it was exhibitors. In August 1943 alone a whole slew of American and British fiction films hit Bombay screens, which today would be correctly read as war propaganda. From the war-themed *Silver Fleet* (UK, 1943), *Random Harvest* (USA, 1942), and *They Died With Their Boots On* (USA, 1941), to empire films such as *Road to Zanzibar* (USA, 1941), *Road to Morocco* (USA, 1942), *Singapore Woman* (USA, 1941), to Orientalist fare such as *Arabian Nights* (USA, 1942), *The Thief of Baghdad* (UK, 1940), and *Jungle Book* (USA, 1942), feature films circulated dramatic and amusing narratives of white valour, heroism, and racial superiority that were essential to sustaining the Allied war effort in the east.[58] At the same time, FAB short documentaries and Indian Movietone News digests were being screened in most of the prominent cinemas in British India (see Figure 5). The new rules not only made additional propaganda screenings compulsory but theatre owners were not compensated in any way for the use of their time and space.[59]

According to the IFI, about 1,300 cinemas across India were regularly screening their short films, reaching approximately six million people each week.[60] Weekly newsreels from Indian News Parade, which was government-controlled (initially produced as Indian Movietone News by the British Movietone company), were 'screened aggressively in cinema halls through the length and breadth of the country in 1942 and 1943'.[61] Ravi Vasudevan comments on the active role of Indian film collaborators in IFI productions, a participation that indicated 'industrial compliance' but 'd[id] not always suggest duress'.[62] As Rotem Geva notes in this volume, the 'events [of 1942] forced Indian socialists (who led Quit India) to break from… Indian communists (who supported the Allied war effort following the German invasion of the Soviet Union)…'.[63] This terrain of mixed motivations and frequent reversals helps us to understand the role of writer and critic K. A. Abbas in making the IFI film *Voice of the People* (1943).[64]

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[57] *Picturpost*, 15 August 1943, p. 16.

[58] There were more direct propaganda films too, such as RKO Radio's *Hitler's Children* (1943).

[59] Which, as the *Journal of the Film Industry* pointed out, was a grossly unfair practice when compared with propaganda adverts in newspapers which the colonial administration paid for.

[60] 'An eulogy on waste', *filmindia*, October 1944, p. 8, which refers to an unnamed IFI publication from 1944 for statistics.

[61] Swarnavel Eswaran Pillai, *Madras Studios: Narrative, Genre, and Ideology in Tamil Cinema* (New Delhi: Sage Publication, 2015), p. 58. From September 1943 onwards the production and distribution of Indian Movietone News was taken over by the government under the new title of Indian News Parade. See *filmindia*, October 1944, p. 9. The government required distributors to pay for the use of these films, which again, was a justifiably controversial policy. A. Rajadhyaksha and P. Willemen, *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema* (London and New York: British Film Institute and Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 22.

[62] Vasudevan, 'Official and amateur', p. 83.

[63] Rotem Geva, 'Torn between the nation and the world: D. F. Karaka and Indian journalism in the Second World War' in this special issue.

[64] Abbas was also a journalist, first and foremost, who had already dramatized his passion for press freedom and the power of the Fourth Estate in his screenplay for the film *Naya Sansar* (1941). For more on

Figure 5. An advertisement for Movietone News boasts of bringing news from all war fronts in five Indian languages. *Source: filmindia,* January 1942, p. 4. Internet Archive.

Nevertheless, by 1944 Indian audiences seemed fed up of IFI shorts and newsreels. 'We are tired of seeing Indians leading mules about in aimless fashion, making chapatties, grinning at Generals and firing precious ammunition into the atmosphere', wrote S. A. Sabvala in the *Bombay Sentinel* newspaper, claiming that a collective 'we' 'are tired of admiring the architectural masterpieces of Sir Edwin Lutyens, as background for coming and going Viceroys, garden parties, and futile conferences'.[65] Comments such as these allow us access to the affective complexity of viewing propaganda in

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Abbas, see Geva, 'Torn between the nation and the world'; also D. Mukherjee, 'Creating Cinema's Reading Publics: The Emergence of Film Journalism in Bombay', in Ravi Sundaram (ed.), *No Limits: Media Studies from India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 165–198.
  [65]Quoted in 'Stop this muddle', *filmindia*, January 1944, pp. 7–9.

India. Audience reactions from this time, a field requiring much more research, confirm arguments that 'the aesthetic practices and technological imaginaries of colonial information were filtered through the politics of race and ethnicity characteristic of late colonialism', as they underline that Indian viewers were cinematically attuned to the colonial politics of race.[66] Cliched portrayals of Indians and grandiose depictions of state frivolities were grating on Indian nerves, even those supportive of the Allied war effort. It is reported that theatre-goers often stayed outside the theatre during the mandatory propaganda screenings and 'theatre-owners obligingly r[a]ng the bell again to tell the people that the real stuff has started'.[67]

Local magistrates devised their own punishments for screening non-compliance. In June 1944 a theatre was fined Rs 1,000 and its manager sentenced to six months in jail for not screening prescribed propaganda short films.[68] As Baburao Patel put it: 'If the underlying purpose of the war films is to create sympathy for this war among the masses, it will never achieve it by such vindictive acts which, to say the least, tend only to create hostility between the rulers and the ruled.'[69] Alongside a steady hardening of public opinion against coercive governmental strategies, Indian exhibitors, producers, and film journalists started to unite behind a more formal and aesthetic question about the efficacy of different genres of propaganda. There seemed to be a unanimous opinion that effective propaganda could not be shoved down the viewer's throat but had to be disguised in hidden and attractive ways. Film critics maintained that,

> propaganda of any kind should not come with the label of propaganda written on it in bold letters… They should be so made as to combine story value plus entertainment with the propaganda idea, either coming as a moral or in some indirect way. The reason why Government made propaganda films have failed so far is due to the fact that they have been advertised as war films.[70]

The view of propaganda experts in England was quite the opposite. A memorandum by the International Broadcasting and Propaganda Enquiry (June 1939), an agenda-setting document, held that the only justified occasion for '"subtle and indirect" messaging is when trying to convince the educated minority'.[71] Indian filmmakers and British propaganda experts both agreed that 'propaganda should never be dull', but the blatant condescension of British-led war propaganda felt irksome in the colony.[72]

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[66]Vasudevan, 'A British documentary film-maker's encounter with empire', p. 745.

[67]*filmindia*, July 1944, p. 15.

[68]'Unnecessarily vindictive and severe!', *filmindia*, July 1944, p. 14.

[69]Ibid.

[70]'Matters that matter', *Picturpost*, 15 August 1943, p. 16.

[71]Philip M. Taylor, 'Techniques of persuasion: basic ground rules of British propaganda during the Second World War', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 57–66.

[72]Here, Mazzarella's reading of Hafeez Jallandhari's policy for radio propaganda differs from my findings in the film context. Actively in support of the war effort, Jallandhari believed that mass support in India was to be built using subliminal messaging. While the Bombay filmwallahs also agree on this point of subtle messaging, their interests are oriented towards short-term box office profits and indifference to the war effort rather than 'an ambitious attempt at covert mass affect management' as Mazzarella, 'A torn performative dispensation', p. 5, suggests for Jallandhari.

Bit by bit, India's filmmaking concerns pushed back against direct or explicit propaganda, thus questioning the very basis of the government's propaganda initiative—the form of the nonfiction short film which had been naturalized as the obvious cinematic form for the war effort. These tactical pushbacks, motivated by creative frustration, industrial strategy, commerce, and nationalism, succeeded in shifting British propaganda efforts from the explicit state address of the documentary to the more flexible form of the Indian-language fiction film. The films that emerged from this policy, variously termed 'war effort' films and 'instructional films', belong to a range of ideological persuasions, mixed commercial and industrial motivations, and ambivalent distances from the colonial state and its war agenda. They mark what I see as a final stage in the local cine-ecology's rejection of the colonial mandate of war propaganda.

The controller of film publicity, New Delhi, P. N. Thapar, also head of the IFI, selected 25 film producers from across India to make 25 'full length instructional films' and a few documentary shorts. The IFI's concession to the film industry—commissioning full-length features instead of solely nonfiction shorts—shifted the power equation between filmmakers and the state. No longer confined to a marginal role as consultants and hired technicians, they were now keenly questioning the profitability of war features. The main benefit that would accrue to these select companies was guaranteed access to raw film. Fourteen of the chosen companies were based in Bombay, the rest divided between Calcutta, Madras, and Punjab.[73] Almost all of these were established concerns with their own studios and equipment. Independent producers, that is, those without many fixed assets, were wait listed. This explicit favouring of studios over independents was achieved through aggressive lobbying by the most influential members of the Indian Motion Picture Producers' Association, which was keen to sideline independent filmmakers and consolidate their own position in the cine-ecology. Thapar thus institutionalized an unstated hierarchy of local film concerns, thereby exacerbating internal industry anxieties about privilege and preferential treatment by the government, and also stoking a debate that continues until today—the gulf between 'insiders' and 'outsiders'.

The war effort film comprised an in-between mode of propaganda that struggled to combine popular sensationalism with an explicit nod to the Allied war effort. For film producers this mode presented a tricky feat of ideological manoeuvring, a problem that was resolved by slapping together an omnibus of attractions that sought to please a range of constituencies, thereby also watering down the war propaganda aspects of the content. Films such as *Chand* (1944) included scenes that discussed wartime rationing, while *Char Ankhen* (1944) paid lip service to the war effort by featuring a character who joins the nursing corps. *Pagli Duniya* (1944) critiqued the hoarding of grains (see Figure 6), while a female protagonist in *Piya Milan* (1945) spends some screen time entertaining troops. Advertising campaigns for these films did not mention the war and focused instead on romance, music, and dance. Only a handful of these films are available to watch today but from their publicity materials, published synopses, and reviews it is apparent that a majority of the specially commissioned war effort films half-heartedly injected their commercial, entertaining plots with vague

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[73]The Bombay producers included Bombay Talkies, Filmistan, Wadia Movietone, Rajkamal Kalamandir, Ranjit Film Co., Minerva Movietone, Prakash Pictures, Mehboob Productions, and Kardar Productions.

Figure 6. Poster for *Pagli Duniya* (Aspi, 1944), a war effort film produced by Ranjit Movitone. *Source:* National Film Archive of India, Pune.

messages about social uplift, modernization, Western medicine, rural development, and volunteer work. A few films that centrally integrated the war into their storylines, such as *Panna* (1945) and *Burma Rani* (1945), used the opportunity to insert patriotic speeches about *azaadi* or freedom (more on this later). Overall, the reluctance of filmmakers to participate in state-sponsored didactic messaging, and the largely indifferent film fare that was produced, were both symptoms of and strategies against colonial coercion.

Indian film critics applied a different kind of pressure on filmmakers to keep propaganda out of their pictures. Film after film was lambasted for propaganda that was too-obvious, 'blatant', or 'aggressive'. Thus, *Police* was panned for 'present[ing] more

war than the war itself does!'.[74] Devika Rani, a producer at Bombay Talkies (one of the select recipients of IFI war effort licences), tried to push back against the propaganda mandate using audience expectations as her argument. In a letter to Thapar, she says:

> I might mention that producing instructional pictures in our case has not helped our reputation much. A story like *Char Ankhen*, so simple, the public might have taken to it if it was not told continuously that it was a propaganda picture…. However much you entertain them in an instructional picture of feature length at the back of their minds is always that feeling of being forced to see something. I might be wrong but this is what I have gathered from various reports and from most distributors connected with such a film. Even we dislike seeing American films if they have a spark of propaganda when we go to a movie for entertainment. Don't you feel the same?[75]

Echoing these sentiments, Baburao Patel reiterated that for 'propaganda to be successful it must be cloaked and suggestive. No sooner it becomes obvious it only helps to create hostility in the minds of the masses.'[76] Of audiences he noted that 'It is quietly understood that the masses are not for the war, not so much because of the prevalent politics, but because of the economic distress prevalent in the country. To such masses the war angle can only be acceptable if it is presented with plenty of entertainment.'[77] What emerges out of these public and private articulations is a consolidation of ideas as to what did and did not count as entertainment for India's viewing publics, a broad swathe whose pulse could ostensibly be taken by box-office results and which was defined by bourgeois stereotypes and anxieties about mass affect. At the same time, there is also a significant narrative here about popular attitudes towards the war, one that cannot be gauged only by looking to politicians and public intellectuals. Indeed, while the 'masses' might clamour for light-hearted entertainment, they also experienced the war as deprivation and distress. Volatile wranglings between Congress nationalists, communist anti-fascists, or Royist internationalists were simply not relevant for the majority of filmgoers in India.

Anti-Japanese messaging and the ambivalence of the cinematic image

After the fall of Singapore and Burma, the British grew increasingly anxious about Indian attitudes towards the Japanese. Indeed, for many in the subcontinent, the victory of Japan over Britain represented the defeat of a Western power by an Asian force.[78] These concerns reached a new crescendo when Subhash Chandra Bose announced the Provisional Government of Azad Hind in 1943, a government-in-exile that was promptly recognized by Germany and Japan. From a propaganda perspective, there emerged an urgency to shift the focus to anti-Japanese messaging

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[74]*filmindia*, July 1944, p. 61.

[75]Letter from Devika Rani to Thapar, 27 December 1944, Dietze Family Archive.

[76]'Why this pretence?', *filmindia*, July 1944, p. 12.

[77]Ibid.

[78]This is clearer to see when we consider the doctrine of Pan-Asian liberation espoused by wartime Japan under the rubric of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

Figure 7. Anti-Japanese propaganda disseminated in popular magazines. *Source: filmindia*, March 1942, p. 42.

(see Figure 7). Under the supervision of the IFI, a handful of explicitly anti-Japanese propaganda features were commissioned in 1943–1944, which were ultimately released between 1944 and 1946. *Burma Rani, Panna*, and *Badi Maa* (1945) are three of the most significant anti-Japanese films made in India that help us further unpack the ways in which Indian filmmakers negotiated the propaganda dictates of the colonial administration. Their mixed messaging and complex reception histories also

remind us that nationalism, anti-imperialism, and anti-fascism did not necessarily coincide.[79]

Burma Rani was one among four war-effort films released in Madras in 1945.[80] It has been singled out by film historians because of its complex reception history; initially lauded by the British and later disavowed, the film was finally banned by the Madras censor board in a newly independent India.[81] The contradictory reception histories of war effort films point to the uniquely fraught politics of the war as well as the ambivalence of the cinematic image. The postwar legacy of *Burma Rani* also reflects the larger silences around the Second World War in post-colonial India.

The primary plot in *Burma Rani* is a love story between a pilot with the Royal Indian Air Force and an Indian dancer brought up by a Burmese guardian in Rangoon. The Indian pilot, Ranjit Kumar, crash lands near Japanese-occupied Rangoon while on a sortie and takes refuge in the house of the dancer, Rani. A second plot revolves around an Indian spy ring in Burma that is led by a woman, Miss Mangalam. Both plots intertwine at two key nodes: first, they serve as opportunities to showcase the brutality of Japanese military commanders in scenes of torture and sexual assault. Second, they come together spatially in a Buddhist shrine where Indian spies and dancers, disguised pilots, and Japanese police have equal right of access. Overall, this extant film has an energetic, high adventure tempo, with several romantic-comic scenes interspersed with scenes of technological and military spectacle involving radios, guns, speedboats, parachutes, planes, wireless transmitters, even carrier pigeons. Some of the most striking scenes feature the Japanese general, a character styled after Hitler, who is framed in sinister compositions in a large war room-like office. This Japanese villain's inhumanity is quickly established in an introductory sequence when he orders the torture of a suspected spy and proceeds to calmly smoke a cigarette while the man is being brutalized off-screen.

On its first release, *Burma Rani* was appreciated by the British; the local war propaganda officer, G. D. B. Harvey, presided over the film's premiere where he presented the director, T. R. Sundaram, with an ornamental sword embossed with a colonial emblem.[82] Film scholar Swarnavel Pillai reports that Harvey subsequently changed his mind and grew suspicious about the portrayal of the Japanese characters, holding back the film's commercial release.[83] These doubts about whether the film was *for* the Allied war effort or *against* the British signal the ideological complexity of a war film triangulated between India-Britain-Japan. While the Japanese characters in *Burma Rani* were straightforwardly caricatured and negatively stereotyped, the Indian spies and military officers were more complicated in their address. Ostensibly these were men and women fighting for the British Army but their motivations were ascribed to a patriotism that could be easily read as anticolonial.

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[79]C.f. Geva, 'Torn between the nation and the world'.

[80]*Manasamraksanam* was also about the India-Burma-Japan triangle and featured an Indian hero who rescues a Burmese woman from the Japanese in India, in return for her saving an Indian ship from getting blown up by Japanese spies.

[81]Pillai, *Madras Studios*, p. 60.

[82]Ibid., p. 64.

[83]Ibid., p. 60.

Moreover, as scholars of film censorship have pointed out, Indian filmmakers had perfected the art of coded anticolonial messaging since the 1920s when colonial censor surveillance became draconian.[84] This art of coding resulted in the training of the Indian viewer in the parallel art of *decoding*. Cinematic representations of authoritarian landlords, factory owners, and other oppressive figures of power were frequently read as metaphors of colonial power, while heroic speeches railing against oppression and injustice, or rallying for freedom were interpreted as stirring messages of nationalist fervour. Thus, Harvey's reluctance might have been a fear that the Japanese characters in *Burma Rani* were designed as representatives of *all* forced occupations and all assaults on national self-determination, not unlike the British colonial occupation of India. This highly nuanced and complicated arena of interpretive potential is made possible both by the cinematic medium and cinema's very specific political history in British India. It is this cine-ideological ambivalence, layered across the registers of characterization, dialogue, visual composition, and *mise-en-scene*, and made necessary in a censorship regime, that allowed *Burma Rani* to be read as pro-British by the Madras censors in 1947.

Panna, made in Pune by the Navyug Chitrapat film company, had a similarly divergent reception (see Figure 8). Again, the title derives from the name of the central female protagonist, this time a Lahore songstress named Panna who is a talented and virtuous dancing girl. When a greedy pimp tries to kidnap her for a wealthy client, Panna stabs him to death. Convicted of murder, Panna is transported to the Andamans to serve out a term of life imprisonment, or *sazaa-e-kala pani*. As Panna begins her torturous confinement in the Cellular Jail, the Japanese Army advances further and further towards South Asia, ultimately capturing the Andaman islands. Panna escapes the Japanese, has a series of encounters with a Mata Hari-style Japanese agent, participates in some thrilling wartime espionage involving radio transmitters and other hi-tech devices, and finally dances her way out of danger and into a respectable married life. In a politically loaded sequence early in *Panna*, a prisoner named Azad ('free') who was imprisoned in the Cellular Jail by the British for revolutionary activity, is offered freedom by the Japanese on condition that he work as an Axis agent. This plot line reminds the audience that at the time the Cellular Jail was overwhelmingly identified as a space for political prisoners, which conferred a heightened revolutionary status on its dissident inmates.[85] Azad, an anticolonial revolutionary in name and speech, refuses the Japanese offer, announcing that even though Indians desire independence it will not be an independence brought by the Japanese. Azad is shot dead. Even as he is dying, he declaims proudly that 'the martyrs of freedom (*azaadi ke shaheed*) are immortal. If the Japanese were to enter Hindustan they would encounter 40

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[84]On film censorship in late colonial India, see Prem Chowdhry, *Colonial India and the Making of Empire Cinema: Image, Ideology and Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Someshwar Bhowmik, *Cinema and Censorship: the Politics of Control in India* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2009); Aruna Vasudev, *Liberty and Licence in the Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1978); Raminder Kaur and William Mazzarella (eds), *Censorship in South Asia: Cultural Regulation from Sedition to Seduction* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2012); William Mazzarella, *Censorium: Cinema and the Open Edge of Mass Publicity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); Debashree Mukherjee, 'A specter haunts Bombay: censored itineraries of a lost communistic film', *Film History*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2019, pp. 29–59.

[85]For more on the history of the Cellular Jail as a carceral site for political dissidents post-1857, see Aparna Vaidik, *Imperial Andamans: Colonial Encounter and Island History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

Figure 8. *Panna* advertised in *filmindia. Source: filmindia* magazine, October 1944, p. 10.

crore Azads.'[86] This speech and Azad's violent death have a transformative impact on Panna who witnesses the entire spectacle of martyrdom. Outside the diegesis, Azad's speech is calculated to stir the emotions of patriotic Indian viewers with words that are affectively overdetermined by the ongoing freedom movement.

It is interesting to see how this scene was described and interpreted at the time and in retrospect. The publicity booklet published by Navyug Chitrapat describes Azad as exhorting Panna to 'tell Indians to resist Japanese aggression and not to sell our country to the blood-thirsty fascists of the East'.[87] If this textual version of the film (in English) offers us a patriotic and anti-fascist read on Azad's resistance, here is how K. A. Abbas (who was also related to the film director Najam Naqvi) remembers the film:

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[86]Dialogue from the surviving print of the film. The film can be watched online at: https://indiancine.ma/EBI/player/CL, [accessed 28 March 2023].

[87]Panna *song booklet* (Poona: Navyug Chitrapat, 1945).

I remember two of the producers, with whom I was associated at that time, they submitted stories which were passed by the *Govt Info Dept*, as scripts for 'War effort' films, but which were really anti-imperialist, though also anti-Fascist films, which, far from saying anything against the national sentiments, in fact took advantage to work in scenes which would project the national sentiment. One of these was a routine kind of melodrama called *Panna* but, as this story was about a girl who escapes from the Andaman Islands after the Japanese take it over, it was possible to project in this film the character of a revolutionary, jailed by the British and sentenced to life-imprisonment in the Andaman Islands. And when this revolutionary is caught by the Japanese, the Japanese offer him freedom on the condition that he should go back to India and support them. And there this revolutionary, he says 'I did not sell myself to the British, nor shall I sell myself to you.' And eventually he dies at the hands of the Japanese, but while dying, he is raising slogans for the freedom and liberty of India.[88]

Abbas remembers a line that does not exist in the extant video copy of *Panna* currently available online: 'I did not sell myself to the British, nor shall I sell myself to you.' It is possible that Abbas misremembered this line, which would certainly have been censored by the British administration, or he remembers a version of the dialogue script before it was filmed. In either case, he helps us understand something of the experience of watching coded film fare and listening between the lines. Abbas's retrospective reading of the film is reinforced by a contemporaneous *Times of India* article published a week prior to the release of *Panna*: 'A streak of romance embellishes the picture which is replete with patriotic sentiment.'[89] The nationalist paper *Bombay Chronicle* went a step further to claim that 'the film may be said to have set the trend for producers to incorporate nationalism in the theme of war-pictures'. Just as Abbas remembered it, the *Chronicle* reviewer describes Panna's epiphany while incarcerated in the Cellular Jail in anti-British terms: 'When the Japanese invade the living hell created by British imperialists, the girl escapes and fights against the invaders, realizing that one foreign yoke, however irksome, should not be replaced by another, equally bad.'[90] Clearly, though the colonial war apparatus exhorted Indian filmmakers to produce anti-Japanese films, many of these were treated as pretexts for patriotic and anticolonial messaging and remained indifferent to the particularity of the so-called Japanese menace, where one 'foreign yoke' was hardly different from another.

Halfway through *Burma Rani* the Burmese guardian asks Rani to perform a dance show at a tea party he is hosting for the Japanese general. Appalled by a request, which she equates with pimping, Rani lambasts her guardian in very strong terms.[91] Rani's anger and humiliation at being forced to perform for a coercive colonizer can be read as a metaphor for the dilemma of the broader cine-ecology itself. Indian filmmakers were

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[88]Ibid.

[89]*Times of India*, 2 June 1945, p. 8.

[90]'Panna wins acclaim', *Bombay Chronicle*, 18 August 1945, p. 8. On the same page the reviewer says this about another war effort film: 'Prafulla Pictures' latest offering [Bari Ma] is a propaganda story into the fabric of which playwright Khandekar has woven a note of patriotism. It depicts the trials and tribulations of two families of Dinapur, a small town on the Assam border, till recently the target of Japanese bombs.'

[91]I would like to thank Dr Usha Iyer for their help with the dialogue of *Burma Rani*.

part of a commercial entertainment industry that had survived without any institutional help and was remarkably independent of British influence or patronage. While industry representatives resented the British for not supporting a local industry, this neglect also afforded them a rare autonomy. For the British to suddenly impose themselves as the masters of the film industry, dictating form and content, audience and message, was justifiably intolerable.

The IFI's pretence of fairness, a 'typically British' value espoused by the colonial administration, struck local filmmakers as hypocrisy. The handful of filmmakers who won IFI favour struggled to produce neutral content, let alone explicitly anticolonial messaging. Even filmmakers outside the IFI purview had to negotiate the strict norms of wartime censorship. In May 1944 the IFI released a short film featuring footage of Gandhi's release after two years of imprisonment at the Aga Khan Palace in Pune. This footage was greeted with 'spontaneous cheers' by audiences but annoyance from commercial filmmakers whose work was heavily surveilled and censored if they so much as featured posters of Gandhi or actors styled in round-rimmed spectacles and a dhoti.[92] Examples of such double standards and contradictory policies abound, and when we consider film content, exhibition, industrial constraints, and audiences as part of an interconnected ecology we are able to understand the full force of what it meant to be making and watching films in India during the war.

Conclusion: A useless cinema?

The Second World War in India was marked by several ideological standoffs and reversals. The colonial government first sought and then completely rejected proposals that could lead India towards political sovereignty. When talks with the Cripps Mission broke down, the Congress launched a full-throated movement for immediate independence. The Communist Party of India (CPI) first declared the war an 'Imperial War' to be rejected and later deemed it a 'People's War' to be supported. From being a banned organization, the CPI returned to the public political fray. The Muslim League rejected the Congress's Quit India call, choosing instead to support the war. Meanwhile, hundreds of Indian youths were deeply moved by S. C. Bose's plans for a free India and aligned with or joined the Indian National Army, even though it was an Axis ally. For many Indians, therefore, the political meanings of the war were neither starkly obvious nor fixed. Attitudes ranged from colonialist to nationalist to anti-majoritarian to anti-imperialist to anti-fascist to internationalist to anti-British to plain exhausted indifference. Indeed, for a vast majority of Indians the war was a daily existential battle against hunger and starvation.[93] The cine-ecology thus offers us a microcosmic view of the many shades of discomfort with the war. Commercial concerns about box-office results, industrial concerns about supply chains and licence regimes, aesthetic concerns about subtlety, and political concerns about the ideological meanings of the war were all tightly mixed in.

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[92]T. V. P., 'Information films "shoot" Gandhiji', *Bombay Chronicle*, 20 May 1944, p. 2. T. V. P. cites *Naya Tarana* and *Apna Ghar* as two films that were cut or banned.

[93]See Ahona Panda, 'From fascism to famine: Complicity, conscience, and the narrative of "peasant passivity" in Bengal, 1941–1945' in this special issue for a detailed discussion of the Bengal Famine.

In the very last years of the Second World War, Indian film studios hit upon a narrative formula that embodied all the ambivalence that local filmmakers felt about participating in the British war effort: the trope of the good sibling–bad sibling. Today we can read these films, each made with the help of special wartime licences, as emblematic of the intense contradictions that characterized India's and Indian filmmakers' response to a war they had not chosen. *Police* (1944), for example, offered an action-packed crime story revolving around two brothers. In a storyline uncannily reminiscent of the 1970s blockbuster, *Deewar* (1975), the elder brother is a criminal who profits from wartime hoarding and black-market profiteering, while the younger brother is an upright policeman out to punish profiteers. The film, unfortunately, is lost to us today and we can only imagine the kind of dramatic dialogues that were spoken by the two brothers in scenes of inevitable confrontation.[94] One might justifiably speculate that the rogue sibling was portrayed with some empathy and the two sides of the allegorical sibling rivalry were rendered morally muddy, as *Deewar* managed so successfully. *Miss Devi* (1945), similarly, featured twin sisters separated at birth, one becoming a Japanese spy during the war and the other blossoming into a 'good woman'. Here the moral question about which side of the war effort one is on is rendered even more complex by the fact that both sisters were played by the same actress, the popular heroine Leela Desai. Audiences were thus invited to cannily alternate their allegiances between the two characters played by a beloved actress and treat the question of loyalty or disloyalty to the Allied cause as a fundamentally unstable, performative dilemma. More reflexively, these films highlight the conundrum of India's wartime cine-ecology, caught between the demands of the colonial propaganda machine and the polyphonous nationalist and anti-imperialist sentiments of viewers.

The British Ministry of Information's fantasy of collaborating with competent and successful local filmmakers to produce culturally appropriate fare that would win the hearts and minds of India's war-indifferent masses ultimately proved to be just that—wishful thinking. The colonial war apparatus sought to mobilize India's cine-ecologies for its military goals. Indian film practitioners, however, had other ideas. Hyper conscious of the coercive frame within which they were being mobilized, and with strong ideas about the kind of cinema that would bring them commercial, artistic, or ideological satisfaction, India's filmmakers resisted colonial high-handedness in various ways. This resistance is only partially visible in explicit forms such as a refusal to join the FAB. A more subtle form of refusal might be read in the kind of film products that were made under the war regime and the many film industrial contestations of imperial authority at the local level. Where the direct propaganda produced by nonfiction film units embodied a vision of 'media as a form of biopolitics'[95] that could cultivate a productive, pliant population, the indirect and reluctant fiction film propaganda made by local filmmakers might be framed as 'media for its own sake', where films did not fulfil their instructional or propagandist mandate as much as perform the commodity function of keeping the projectors rolling. This was not 'useful cinema' in the way that

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[94]Approximately 95 per cent of all films produced in the Indian subcontinent in the 1930s and 1940s are considered 'lost' films, that is, there is very little hope that extant copies will ever be located. This means that historians of early South Asian cinemas have to contend with a highly fragmented and unrepresentative archive of existing films.

[95]Rice, *Film for the Colonies*, p. 3.

recruitment, training, or topical news films are.[96] Moreover, their utility as pro-British war propaganda was fundamentally undercut in films where characters and plots privileged Indian nationalism. The majority of commercial war effort films were, on the whole, *useless*. As war propaganda, they were useless from a British perspective. I suggest that we read this very uselessness as the frustration of the colonial government's desire for Indian-made war propaganda. The main purpose of these films should be located both in their content and form, as also in the conditions of their production. Despite contemporaneous criticisms of shoddiness and vacuous content, if we take these films seriously we will hear their message loud and clear: this was a war that Indians were dragged into and one of the resistive strategies that Indian filmmakers deployed was to leverage the war strategically in order to source stock supplies and maintain a steady turnover of film output.

The wartime ecology of film production, distribution, and exhibition was sustained by a delicate balance between the availability of raw stock and theatre buildings, between liquidity and infrastructural stability, between audience demand and critical feedback. The war, in its myriad implications, circulated through this ecology as a simultaneously productive and repressive force that shaped the material and formal meanings of film as culture and as business. In tracking this circulation via the screen and beyond, a dispersed field of media forms and practices emerges, one that encompasses newsreels, op-eds, war effort films, film magazines, and letters to bureaucrats. Thus, to think with film critics who questioned the appointment of a British film supervisor, or the ambivalent coded messaging of a war effort film, affords us a complex and critical view of minor or otherwise illegible forms of refusal in the Indian response to the Allied war effort.

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[96]Charles Acland, Haidee Wasson and Lee Grieveson have been refining this term—'useful cinema'—to consider non-theatrical films with a pedagogical intent that have rarely been accorded the status of serious subjects of study. Naval recruitment films or short films about how the colonies were producing raw materials for the war effort would thus qualify as 'useful cinema' that was outside the ambit of commercial entertainment but was strategically deployed by institutional, industrial, or political actors. See Charles Acland and Haidee Wasson (eds), *Useful Cinema* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011); and Wasson and Grieveson, *Cinema's Military Industrial Complex*.