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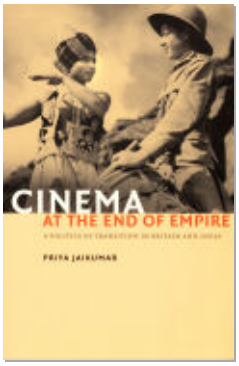
Introduction



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Never had a larger area of the globe been under the formal or informal control of Britain than between the two world wars, but never before had the rulers of Britain felt less confident about maintaining their old imperial superiority.
—Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*

INTRODUCTION

We must abandon the rubric of national cinemas if we are to consider the multiple, conjunctural pressures applied by decolonization on the political entities of an imperial state and its colony. Declining British imperialism, increasing U.S. hegemony, and internal nationalist factions implicated Britain and India in each other's affairs, shaping state policies, domestic markets, and emergent cinemas in both regions. A parallel narration of their intertwined histories clarifies the global function of cinema during late colonialism by interrogating the consequences of a redistribution of political power in plural and linked cultural contexts.

In 1931 Winston Churchill spoke to the Council of Conservative Associates in Britain, explaining his resistance to granting India dominion status. "To abandon India to the rule of Brahmins would be an act of cruel and wicked negligence. . . . These Brahmins who mouth and patter the principles of Western Liberalism . . . are the same Brahmins who deny the primary rights of existence to nearly sixty million of their own countrymen whom they call 'untouchable' . . . and then in a moment they turn around and begin chopping logic with Mill or pledging the rights of man with Rousseau."[1] In castigating

[23.137.249.165] Project MUSE (2024-12-04 19:29 GMT)

Hindu Brahmins for their adherence to oppressive social practices despite a competent knowledge of Western liberalism, Churchill exposed the ineffable qualifications in his own rationale for Britain's continued control over India. His suggestion was that although Britain *also* denied sovereignty to well over sixty-million people, it did not patter on about liberalism but grasped the true essence of that political philosophy. Two kinds of commercial British and Indian film from the 1930s responded directly to this line of argument. The first recreated similarly paternalistic defenses of empire, with films like *Sanders of the River* (1935) and *The Drum* (1938), both produced by Churchill's friend and confidant Alexander Korda. The second, against Churchillian condemnation, imagined an alternative Indian society.

Nitin Bose's *Chandidas*, a popular 1934 film produced by the Calcutta-based film studio New Theaters, opens with the declaration that it is "based on the life problems of the poet Chandidas—A problem India has not been able to solve."[2] The film tells the melodramatic tale of a young poet (K. L. Saigal) and his beloved Rani (Uma Shashi), a lower-caste woman, through a narrative and a musical soundtrack that continually link the romantic tribulations of these young lovers to contemporary social issues. Chandidas fights the Brahmin taboo against washerwoman Rani *dhoban*'s entry into a Hindu temple, weighing the arguments for humanity (*manushyata*) over religious conduct (*dharma*). By the film's conclusion, a coalition of commoners supports the transgressive couple's vision of an egalitarian future for India.

Popular British and Indian films of the 1930s foresee decolonization in utopian visions of realigned power, holding dystopic predictions at bay. In so doing, their content and form negotiates the anxiety and exhilaration of impending sociopolitical changes in the imperial metropolis and its colony. Extending Ella Shohat's and Robert Stam's observation that cinema's beginnings coincided with "the giddy heights" of imperialism, I argue that cinema's late colonial period embodied the ambiguities, possibilities, and fears generated by two historical paradoxes: that of colonialism's moral delegitimation *before* its political demise and that of its persistence in shaping modern postcolonial societies well *after* the end of formal empire.[3] To articulate key facets of this complex transition as it relates to cinema, the communicative terrain of negotiations surrounding film policy (part 1) and the affective, ideological domain of film aesthetics (parts 2 and 3) structure my analysis. This allows for a critical and conceptual comparativism across British and Indian regulatory texts and film forms that would be harder to achieve if I began with the category of national cinema.

The framework of national cinemas has become a dominant analytic trope in Film Studies because of the nation's function as a central axis along which films are regulated, produced, consumed, and canonized.[4] Insights about the nation's ideological production and reconstitution through cinema hold profound relevance to my analysis, but I abdicate the nation as an organizing device in order to resist the temptation of making it, in Foucault's words, a "tranquil locus on the basis of which other questions (concerning . . . structure, coherence, systematicity, transformations) may be posed."[5] The very notion of a modern nation-state was under construction in India and under reconstruction in Britain. At the territorial apogee of empire in the early twentieth century, decolonizing movements pushing for a universalization of political modernity (or bourgeois democracy)[6] challenged the legitimacy of colonialism. India's devastatingly partitioned formation threw into question its own viability as a prospective nation, even as it exposed the fragility of a British nation-state that was constituted on internally schismatic—simultaneously liberal and imperial—political philosophies. British and Indian films were part of this turbulence. One has only to think of the conclusions to *Shejari/Padosi* (Marathi/Hindi, Shantaram, 1941) and *Black Narcissus* (Powell and Pressburger, 1947) in conjunction to realize this: the spectacular drowning of a Hindu and a Muslim in Shantaram's film imparts the same disquiet as an Irish and British nun's fatal scuffle by a precipice in the latter. Each film permits a particular textual figuration of uncertainty about the political future.

The study of colonial cinemas—framed by an analysis of Eurocentrism, censorship, racism, dominant ideology, and nationalist resistance—has not adequately addressed the cultural registers of changing international power politics during the early twentieth century. The British State underwent complex negotiations to render its regime legitimate and effective in the face of anticolonial nationalisms, domestic dissent, and ascending U.S. global power. In this political landscape Indian filmmakers rebuffed imperial state initiatives while fashioning a regionally hegemonic film industry and wresting a domestic audience from Hollywood's control. To grasp these complexities, I offer an interpretation that moves between the British and Indian governments, between British and Indian cinemas in relation to their states, and between silent and sound films. Thus the operative categories in this book—state policy and film aesthetics—indicate related areas of contention *between* a fragmenting empire and a nascent nation, as well as *within* them.

Film policies and film texts also present parallels and counterpoints as types of discourses. The regulatory debates and film aesthetics of this period

[23.137.249.165] Project MUSE (2024-12-04 19:29 GMT)

are both shot through with contradictions between the languages of imperialism and anticolonialism, making them linked expressions of a political transformation.[7] But the British State treated film as a generic commodity in order to create a comprehensive film policy applicable to Britain's imperium, although in reality a British film had appeals and market-potentialities quite distinct from those of an Indian, Canadian, or Australian film. In the latter sections of this book I examine particular British and Indian films of radically divergent national, economic, and aesthetic agendas to expose the fallacy of the British State's universalist assumptions about cinema discussed in part 1.

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My narrative opens in 1927, the year after a watershed imperial conference that marked the British State's official acknowledgment of its changing status in relation to its colonies and dominions. Resolutions passed at Britain's Imperial Conference of 1926, which closely preceded the Brussels International Congress against Colonial Oppression and Imperialism, resulted in concessions to dominion separatism and colonial self-governance.[8] The term *commonwealth* began to replace *empire*, and the British State reoriented itself to a new political collective.[9] A key debate in Britain, echoing controversies from 1903, surrounded the creation of "imperial preference."[10] Eventually ratified at the Imperial Conference of 1932, imperial preference involved agreements between territories of the British Empire to extend tariff concessions to empire-produced goods. The British State hoped that reinvigorating the imperial market would assist Britain in counteracting its new rivals in trade (the United States) and ideology (the Soviet Union). Rebelling colonies and nearly sovereign dominions could still transform "Little England" into "Great Britain," it was suggested, if only Britain could appeal to the idea of *bilateralism* in imperial affairs. Over the next two decades, the shift in Britain was tectonic: from free trade to protectionism, from the rhetoric of dominance to admissions of vulnerability, from a posture of supremacy to concessions to the need for reciprocity in imperial relations.

In film the official re-evaluation of Britain's industrial status led to the Cinematograph Films Act of 1927, which fixed an annual percentage of British films to be distributed and exhibited within Britain. The act was meant to guarantee exhibition of British films, thus attracting investment to the nation's neglected film-production sector, which had languished while British film exhibitors and distributors (renters) benefited through trading with Hollywood. Following World War I, the dictates of profit and of booking con-

tracts had impelled British film renters and exhibitors to distribute and release Hollywood films in preference to British ones.[11] By 1924, three of the largest distribution companies in Britain were U.S.-owned, handling about 33 percent of total films screened in Britain. Hollywood dominated British colonial and dominion film markets as well, and a dramatic signpost of Britain's crisis came in 1924, in the month dubbed "Black November," when British studios remained dark in the absence of domestic film production.

The Cinematograph Films Act (or Quota Act) of 1927, ostensibly initiated to assist British films against Hollywood's prevalence in the domestic British market, was in truth equally shaped by imperial aspirations. A trail of letters, petitions to the state, and memoranda archives the efforts of British film producers to extend the ambit of state protectionism to the empire by way of "Empire quotas" and "Empire film schemes." Not unlike a potential Film Europe that aimed to contest Film America in the 1920s and 1930s, these quota initiatives and empire film schemes were attempts to persuade colonial and dominion governments of the benefits of a porous, collaborative empire market.[12] To this end the 1927 British Quota Act extended quota concessions not to British films exclusively but to "British Empire films," a new term that posed a strange lexical conundrum, referring simultaneously to *every* film produced in the British Empire (conjuring a world where films from India, Australia, New Zealand, and Britain circulated between those markets with ease) and *no* film (given the impossibility of finding audiences charmed equally by all empire-produced films). As the social historian Prem Chowdhry has shown, British films like *The Drum* screened to anticolonial picketing in India.[13] There was no happy imperial collective, and therefore no film to satisfy it.

The gap between reality and the implicit goal of such film regulations opens new areas for investigation. First, it focuses attention on Britain's ambition to acquire a market within the empire, which underwrote emerging regulatory definitions of the British film commodity in palpable ways. Second, regulatory language betrays material intent when we follow the state's struggle over naming things. In speaking of "the politics of colonial society" as "a world of performatives," Sudipto Kaviraj argues that "words were the terrain on which most politics were done. Despite their symbolic and subliminal character, the political nature of such linguistic performances should not be ignored."[14] In 1927–28 Indian and British film industry personnel, film trade associations, journalists, and statesmen drew on multiple kinds of knowledge (of other cinemas, other governments) and beliefs (in alternative

[23.137.249.165] Project MUSE (2024-12-04 19:29 GMT)

political and economic practices) to launch cosmopolitan criticisms of imperial quota policies. Correspondingly, during the following ten years, British state agents desisted from legislative initiatives for British Empire films and emphasized diplomatic negotiations.

The British film industry's overtures for preferential treatment in India began to gesture increasingly toward Britain's own reciprocal openness to Indian films, as in the following 1932 memorandum sent by British filmmakers to their state.

> The British Film Industry recognizes that India, in common with all other countries, wishes to develop its own film production trade, and that certain Indian-made films, suitable to the European market, may well seek distribution in Great Britain. There is no obstacle to this at present (other than the limited demand in this country for pictures portraying mainly oriental themes) and on the contrary Indian films have exactly the same facilities for inclusion in the United Kingdom quota as films made in any part of the British Empire—including Great Britain. On the other hand, unless India wishes to reserve its home market entirely or mainly for Indian-made films, it is assumed that films of British make are likely to meet the requirements of the population better than those of foreign production.[15]

Such delicately worded imperial presumptions of bilateralism point to a new modality of power play that has been neglected by colonial film scholars.[16] Here Britain is included in the empire rather than asserted as its sovereign commander, though its films claim a greater cultural proximity to India than those of "foreign production." Clearly, applications of "soft power"—that is, attempts at apparently multilateral discussions to assert authority—accompanied the more traditional use of "hard power" through media censorship and unequal film-tariff structures in places like India, Australia, and New Zealand.[17]

The evidence lies in a flurry of administrative paperwork passing between different branches of the British government (the Customs Office, the British Board of Trade, the Dominion and Colonial Office, and the Economic and Overseas Department of Britain's India Office in particular), in which strategic shifts toward notions like "imperial preference" show a state working to transform its empire into a network of allies that would voluntarily assist British film production. What we see in action is a state adapting to its splintering control over an empire, as transformations in imperial relations, state discourse, and colonial subject-positions structure the words of emerg-

ing regulations. Writing about these changes prevents, in Michel Foucault's cinematic metaphor, the surrender of history to "a play of fixed images disappearing in turn," in which postcolonial relations seem to suddenly replace colonial ones without continuities or consequences.[18]

1947 marked Britain's official hand-over of political sovereignty to a region violently divided between India and Pakistan, and my analysis terminates with that year. Despite its apparent tidiness, this book's periodization remains questionable. Epistemological disagreements between Indian historiographers over the nature and locus of anticolonial struggles unsettle efforts to present a linear chronology of Indian nationalism. While everyone agrees that a live wire of colonial resistance ran through the Indian subcontinent by the 1920s, nationalist activism was launched on multiple and frequently nonconsonant fronts by groups like the Swarajists (proponents of self-rule who favored legislative reform), revolutionaries (who supported terrorist violence against the state), Gandhian Satyagrahis (advocates of complete civil disobedience and constructive social work), regional nationalists (like Periyar's Self-Respect Movement and the Dravidian Movement, which hailed independence from imperialism as well as from north India), members of the Muslim League, the Hindu Mahasabha, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the Indian Left, and peasant and tribal resistance groups, to name a few.

Challenging the view that India's nationalist movement, led by the Indian National Congress, succeeded in articulating an inclusive political vision built on civil libertarian and democratic principles, the Subaltern Studies Collective of Indian historians contend that peasant and tribal rebellions formed an autonomous domain of politics.[19] According to the subalternists' argument, excavating sociopolitical consciousness among tribal and minoritarian communities requires writing against the grain of modern India's nationalist history, which has difficulty conceptualizing revolutionary subjectivities formed outside the public realm of bourgeois politics. Breaking down unified notions of nationalism also brings forth the possibility of contradictory affiliations—such as women articulating nationalisms against indigenous and inherited patriarchies—that, though not fully defined movements, nevertheless provided an agenda for social critique and action. Additionally, histories of liberal secular nationalism can be charged with yielding inadequate analytical tools for grasping parallel developments in the politicization of religion since the formation of the Indian nation, a trend proven by the sway of Hindutva politics in India since the 1990s.[20] Beyond cataclysmic divisions between Hindus and Muslims, figureheads like Gandhi, Savarkar, Ambed-

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kar, and C. N. Annadurai signify deep factional, ideological rifts within the nation then and now.

If a narration of India's biography becomes impossible when we question the parameters of its nationalist archive or the terms of its narration, periodizing imperialism also continues to be frustrating work. The Leninist definition of modern imperialism as the height of monopoly capitalism distinguishes it from older monarchical empires (without denying that dynastic ancien régimes accompanied the birth of capitalist adventurism). However, Britain's synchronically varied colonial pursuits across multiple possessions and colonialism's diachronic role in defining the British State's structure and policies over centuries make it difficult to pinpoint originary and concluding events of modern British imperialism.[21] The nation's "internal" colonies of Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales further push definitions of British imperialism to include contentious domestic politics.

Mindful of these dilemmas, I propose that the challenge for a cultural analysis of late empire lies in observing the internal heterogeneities as well as significant ruptures of its practice, and in building a conceptual framework sensitive to imperialism's historical multivalence. To construct this framework we may begin with a significant structural break in British imperialism that occurred with colonialism's "retreat" or, more appropriately, with its rationalization in the mid- to late nineteenth century. To use the anthropologist Ann Stoler's phrase, the "embourgeoisement" of empire during the period of "high" or "late" colonialism "enhanced expectations of hard work, managed sexuality, and racial distancing among the colonial agents," as the British State invented an administrative and educational machinery to discipline imperial officials as well as include colonial subjects in the work of empire-maintenance.[22] In India Thomas Babington Macaulay's educational policies exemplify this modern, bourgeois imperialism. Instituted in 1836, British India's education system was the most practical solution to maintaining British power in a place where a few governed the many; it created, in Macaulay's often quoted words, "a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect."[23] A significant point of rupture in the practice of British imperialism may be located, then, in Britain's modernization of its imperial practices through the formation of liberal democratic institutions across colonies to facilitate imperial administration.

Cinema, coming in the late 1890s, participated in the internal contradic-

tions of a modernized language of empire. Liberalism's impulse toward self-governance put pressure on imperialism's essential unilateralism to define the internal form and formal contradictions of British film policy and commercial film style. These contradictions were exaggerated with Britain's own experience of global vulnerability in the early twentieth century. Various geopolitical factors precipitated a crisis in British state power during the interwar period, including the active intervention of anticolonial movements, domestic debates over the empire's profitability to Britain, and the rise of new (more "efficient" and invisible, transnational and corporate) imperialisms.[24] Britain's cinematographic subjugation to the United States was only one reminder of the nation's newfound fragility, significant given the growing importance of cinema in social life and startling in view of Britain's expectation of dominance over its colonial markets.[25] Sir Stephen Tallents, Chairman of Britain's Empire Marketing Board, a state-funded organization that promoted imperial trade in various commodities from 1926 to 1933, voiced both sentiments when he claimed, "No civilised country can to-day afford either to neglect the projection of its national personality, or to resign its projection to others. *Least of all countries* can England afford either that neglect or that resignation."[26]

On the one hand, the British film industry perceived itself to be victimized by Hollywood in the manner of its own legacy of exploitation. As Britain's *World Film News* bemoaned in 1937, "The Americans, with impressive supply of Hollywood pictures, have the necessary tank power to put native [British] exhibitors to their mercy. They are using it remorselessly. . . . *So far as films go, we are now a colonial people*."[27] On the other hand, colonialism was more than a convenient analogy. Petitions from British film producers lobbying for a quota underscored the "value of empire markets" "to counteract the great advantage held by the American producing companies through their possession of so large and wealthy a market."[28] Even as dominions and colonies acquired a new relevance for British trade in view of rising U.S. economic and territorial power, the push of dominion nationalisms meant that they could not be claimed unilaterally. These internal wrenches formative of British cinema's regulatory and aesthetic composition can be linked to two kinds of changes: the first relates to a conflict between late imperial and emerging postcolonial (and neocolonial) global politics, the second to a shift in the *representability* of imperialism.

Whereas imperialism and nationalism have coexisted as ideologies and as material practices, they have endured inverse histories as systems of signi-

[23.137.249.165] Project MUSE (2024-12-04 19:29 GMT)

fication. The overt discussion of imperialism as a modern economic practice accompanying territorial colonization has been short-lived. Edward Said notes that during the 1860s in England "it was often the case that the word 'imperialism' was used to refer, with some distaste, to France as a country ruled by an emperor."[29] The word "imperialism" did not enter European journalistic and political vocabulary to describe economic and state policy until the 1890s, although most industrialized nations shared a long history of annexation and colonization by that time.[30] In his 1902 book, *Imperialism*, the British political economist J. A. Hobson aimed "to give more precision to a term" that was poorly defined despite being "the most powerful movement in the current politics of the Western world."[31] But already by the 1940s, popular media as well as political rhetoric in the West had grown averse to the word. Europe faced mounting domestic and international criticism against colonial administrative strategies and, after the horrors of European fascism, growing support for demonstrable democratization in the governance of all nations and races. As the nation became a prevalent political unit in the twentieth century, providing a pivot of identification for communities with aspirations for sovereignty, imperialism hid its tracks. The visibility of one necessitated the invisibility of the other, in that empire ceased to be the manifest rationale of international policy.[32] Somewhere in the middle of the twentieth century, empire became embarrassing.

Social theorists ranging from Hannah Arendt and Benedict Anderson to Gyan Prakash observe an "inner incompatibility" between the constructs of "empire" and the liberal "nation-state," because empire's predication on expansion and domination contradicts liberalism's assumption of contractual participation and consent.[33] The onus of conceptual or linguistic inconsistencies is a small inconvenience when imperialism and liberal nationhood cohabit in practice, producing such distinctive political and textual attitudes as imperial nationalism, "enlightened" colonialism, or internally contradictory prescriptions of representative government in definitions of liberal nationalism itself.[34] So it is necessary to emphasize that beyond theoretical incompatibilities, historical events of the early twentieth century made the exclusionary processes and internal contradictions of liberal imperial Western democracies visible and in need of defense.

Historian John Kent points out that after World War I the British State faced the dilemma of needing American money to underwrite postwar recuperation while trying to avoid complete financial dependence on the United States. British strategists hoped that the empire could resolve this crisis.[35]

The state initiated efforts to increase exports to dollar-zones by creating a demand for colonial goods in the United States. This involved modernizing imperial production through colonial development funds and empire quota schemes, and negotiating with increasingly nationalist colonies and dominions.[36] If World War I exposed the extent to which imperial Britain was vulnerable to a changing global economy and polity, World War II revealed the moral anachronism of the British Empire. With the visible cruelties of German and Italian Fascism and the invisible exploitation of American finance capitalism, Britain's brand of colonialism looked awkwardly similar to the former and just plain awkward compared to the latter. Symptomatic of Britain's changing imperial status in this new century, the British State became invested in earning the approbation of an emerging international community of nations by demonstrating its moral responsibility toward its colonies. John Grierson, the founder of Britain's documentary film movement, succinctly expressed both official preoccupations—with colonial welfare and international perception—at the 1948 "Film in Colonial Development" conference. Speaking of the need to train African filmmakers, Grierson reminded his audience that "Hitler, not of pleasant memory, once used a phrase of England's colonies, that we were allowing 'cobwebs to grow in our treasure house.' I shall not say much about that, except to emphasise that international criticism is growing on how we use and develop our work in the Colonies."[37]

The two decades spanned by this book may be best measured or periodized by the divergent legitimacies granted to imperialism and nationalism, which ensured that they had varying legibilities. This variance was expressed in the language of film regulation, in the aesthetics of film form, and in their internal heterogeneities. Factions within the state and the film industries of Britain and India mobilized the appeal of nationalism, with each faction implying that its own position would best serve the needs of its respective nation. Below the apparently unifying discourse of nationalism lay divisive investments in Britain and India's political future. British factions debated questions of colonial dependence versus colonial sovereignty and of free trade versus state protectionism, even as Indians were divided over the form and function of a secular state in India's political future.

Confronting British and Indian state regulations and film texts from this period demands an agnosticism toward their avowed nationalist appeals to discern what was in fact at stake. This requires a sensitivity toward individual film productions, film-policy proposals, and their rebuttals, to read

a late-colonial cultural archive built by British and Indian individuals navigating between increasingly legitimate (modern, nationalist) and delegitimized (imperialist, feudal) discourses. Though policymakers, film directors, film producers, and film actors belonged to different kinds of institutions, all were involved in this play between individual will and institutional language. And so historical agents—parliamentarians and bureaucrats no less than film stars, directors, critics, journalists, and audiences—enter my narrative as participants who modified contexts that, in turn, structured and sanctioned their realms of self-expression.