



PROJECT MUSE®

The Crowd Outside the Lettered City: Imagining the Mass
Audience in 1920s India

Manishita Dass

Cinema Journal, 48, Number 4, Summer 2009, pp. 77-98 (Article)

Published by University of Texas Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.0.0149>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/317404>

The Crowd Outside the Lettered City: Imagining the Mass Audience in 1920s India

by MANISHITA DASS

Abstract: Drawing on the Indian Cinematograph Committee Report of 1928 and the transcripts of its hearings and interviews, this essay shows how middle-class elites in colonial India imagined the mass public created and made visible by the cinema as a divided audience, primarily segmented along class lines, simultaneously menacing and vulnerable.

One day in December 1910, Marathi commercial artist and entrepreneur Dhundiraj Govind Phalke went to the America-India Picture Palace in Bombay to see *The Life of Christ*. As he recounted years later, it proved to be a momentous occasion not only in his life but also in the history of Indian cinema:

I must have seen films on many occasions before this, along with my friends or family, but that day, that Saturday in Christmas, marked the beginning of a revolutionary change in my life. That day also marked the foundation in India of an industry which occupies the fifth place in the myriad of big and small professions that exist. . . . While the life of Christ was rolling fast before my physical eyes, I was mentally visualizing the Gods, *Shri Krishna*, *Shri Ramchandra*, their Gokul and Ayodhya.¹ I was gripped by a strange spell. I bought another ticket and saw the film again. This time I felt my imagination taking shape on the screen. Could this really happen? Could we, the sons of India, ever be able to see Indian images on the screen?²

Phalke's urge to bring "Indian images" to the screen for "the sons of India" eventually resulted in the production of *Raja Harishchandra*, based on a well-known tale

1 Krishna and Ramchandra are prominent Hindu deities and mythological heroes; Gokul and Ayodhya are places associated with Krishna and Ram, respectively.

2 D. G. Phalke, "Essays on the Indian Cinema," *Navyug* (Bombay: November/December 1917). I have used the English translation in Feroze Rangoonwalla, ed., *Phalke Commemoration Souvenir* (Bombay, 1971).

Manishita Dass is an assistant professor at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, holding a joint appointment in the departments of Screen Arts & Cultures and Asian Languages & Cultures. She teaches courses in South Asian cinema, world cinema, film history/theory, and postcolonial theory, and she is currently working on a manuscript titled Outside the Lettered City: Cinema, Nation, and Modernity in India.

from Hindu mythology and celebrated as the first Indian feature film.³ It opened at Bombay's Coronation Cinema on May 3, 1913, and was apparently "an overwhelming success," even though the audiences attending western films in the new picture palaces in the city and the English-language press of Bombay barely noticed it.⁴ It was followed in the next two decades by forty-four other films directed by Phalke, mostly mythologicals (as the genre launched by *Raja Harishchandra* was called), and similar productions by other filmmakers following in his footsteps. By all accounts, these films proved to be extremely popular with large segments of the Indian audience, an audience that the filmmakers were, in part, credited with creating.⁵

As Suresh Chabria points out in "Before Our Eyes: A Short History of India's Silent Cinema," the story of Phalke's entry into cinema has "something of the quality of an originary myth or founding legend" in Indian film histories.⁶ In this origin myth of Indian cinema, carefully crafted by Phalke himself, cinema operates as a visual technology of collective identification that simultaneously invokes and produces a cohesive "national" audience, happily united in their desire to see their "own images" on the screen. From the beginning, Phalke emphasized the nationalist dimension of his films, situating them in the context of the *swadeshi* movement (the nationalist program of self-reliance).⁷ However, as the following extract from a 1927 deposition by Rustomji Dorabji (the Parsi proprietor of several cinemas in Bombay) suggests, cinema's emergence as a site of public culture in early twentieth-century India cannot be plotted only along the axis of the nation. In response to questions posed by members of the Indian Cinematograph Committee (appointed in 1927 by the Government of India to investigate the state of cinema in India), Dorabji vehemently objected to a suggested government-imposed quota that would require him to screen Indian films such as Phalke's mythologicals at his high-end theaters, patronized by Europeans, Anglo-Indians, and the westernized Indian middle class:

If a theater is asked to show even once a week one Indian picture, even that will ruin that particular theater altogether, because the Indian habits and the educated man's habits are so wide apart that with the betel leaves and other things which make them equally dirty and stinking, it will take another three weeks by the time you have cleaned it well and put it in order for the better class Indians . . .

3 Phalke's emphasis on the "sons of India" as his imagined audience is interesting, given that his films drew large female audiences.

4 Eric Barnouw & S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, rev. ed. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980), 14.

5 Ibid., 10–23; Suresh Chabria, "Before Our Eyes: A Short History of India's Silent Cinema," in *Light of Asia: Indian Silent Cinema 1912–1934*, ed. Suresh Chabria (N.: La Giornate del Cinema Muto and National Film Archive of India, 1994), 3–24.

6 Chabria, "Before Our Eyes," 7.

7 On Phalke's films in the context of the *swadeshi* movement, see Ashish Rajadhyaksha, "The Phalke Era: Conflict of Traditional Form and Modern Technology," *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, July–December 1987, and "Neo-Traditionalism," *Framework* 32–33 (1986). See Somnath Zutshi, "Women, Nation, and the Outsider in Contemporary Hindi Cinema," in *Interrogating Modernity*, ed. Tejaswini Niranjana et al. (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1993), for an analysis of the gendered nature and religious coding of Phalke's imagined India.

. . . Once a theater is spoiled—let me give you an example—I did show an Indian picture at my Wellington theater, *Lanka Dahan*, (Dhundiraj Govind Phalke, 1917) and I made Rs.18,000 in one week. But it ruined my theater altogether.

Question: You mean you had to disinfect the cinema . . .

Dorabji: I had to disinfect the hall and at the same time I had to convince my [regular] audience that I had disinfected it and so on. Till that time I went on losing money.⁸

Dorabji's unabashedly elitist distinctions—between “Indian habits” and the habits of “the educated man,” between the typical audience for an Indian film and “the better class of Indians”—reveal a way of imagining the viewing public, apparently shared by many of his elite Indian patrons, which contrasts sharply with Phalke's (and the mythological genre's) invocation of a national community united by a desire to see “Indian images.” The distinction between the “educated Indians” and the “Indian audience” was, in fact, one of the dominant tropes of film reception in early twentieth-century India; it was spatialized in the social topography of cinema in a way that often countered attempts to imagine a fraternal community of equals around the practice of moviegoing.

My archival research on elite cultural constructions of the mass audience in India in the 1920s indicates that cinema did not just function as a nation-building tool that simply engendered a sense of “community-in-anonymity,” like the novel or the newspaper in Benedict Anderson's seminal account of the role of print-capitalism in imagining the nation.⁹ Undoubtedly, cinema played a key role in extending the Indian public sphere beyond the confines of the “lettered city,” by which I mean a public sphere shaped and dominated by elite cultural and political discourse and practice, a domain of power and privilege that was not only urban but urbane, and access to which depended on certain kinds of literacy and cultural capital available only to a small minority of the Indian population.¹⁰ However, even as it expanded the space of the nation beyond the public spheres of the colonial elites, cinema introduced a new set of powerful cultural distinctions and a context of consumption that were not particularly conducive to imagining this space as unified and homogeneous or to picturing the audience as “a fraternity of equals” and a “horizontal comradeship.”¹¹ Spectatorship emerged in colonial India as a site not just of imagining community but also of asserting class difference and social hierarchies. As I show in this essay through an analysis of the elite perceptions of the mass audience that are recorded in the Indian

8 *Indian Cinematograph Committee 1927–1928: Evidence*, vol. 1 (Calcutta: Government of India Publication, 1928), 362–364. [Henceforth referred to as *ICC: Evidence*.]

9 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991).

10 My conceptualization of the lettered city is indebted to *La Ciudad Letrada/The Lettered City* (trans. & ed. John Charles Chasteen, Duke University Press, 1996), Angel Rama's posthumously published work on the nexus between political power, social relations, and elite cultural production in Latin America.

11 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6–7.

Cinematograph Committee documents (1928), the westernized, middle-class elite¹² saw the public space created by cinema as a zone of contestations, “internally marked by cultural difference and the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities, and tense cultural locations.”¹³

Silent Cinema in India. Cinema arrived in India six months after the first public screenings at the Grand Café in Paris. The touring agents of the Lumière Brothers presented the Cinématographe—advertised as “The Marvel of the Century” in *The Times of India*, Bombay’s leading English-language daily—at the upscale Watson Hotel in Bombay on July 7, 1896. The first shows were attended by elite Europeans and Indians, but a week later the program was shifted to a regular theater, the Novelty, which offered a separate section for “Purdah” ladies and a wider range of ticket prices (from four annas to two rupees) and thus drew a larger, more diverse crowd. Although the Lumière shows came to an end a month later, other visiting exhibitors soon followed, and local entrepreneurs emerged as early as 1898, holding shows not only in Bombay but also traveling to the two other major cities of colonial India, Calcutta in the east and Madras in the south. The venues ranged from public halls and established theaters to tent cinemas set up in fairgrounds and *maidans* (open spaces in the heart of colonial cities and towns). By 1910, permanent cinema theaters—ranging from picture palaces to tin sheds—had sprung up in most of the major urban centers (with Bombay and Calcutta leading the way) while the small towns were served by traveling “bioscope” shows, as they were commonly known. By the mid-1910s, cinema had become a popular urban entertainment, although vast segments of India’s rural hinterland remained relatively untouched by the new “marvel.”

While *Raja Harishchandra* became known as the first Indian feature film, it was by no means the first film made by an Indian. As Ashish Rajadhyaksha points out, by the turn of the century a thriving cottage industry in short films had sprung up in the major presidency cities of Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras, mainly around a well-established theater scene.¹⁴ Studios start appearing in Bombay, Calcutta, Kolhapur, and Poona from 1917 onward. While many of these companies were short-lived, the number of Indian productions grew steadily throughout the 1920s. By the mid-1920s, there was a studio system based in the three leading economic and urban zones of British India; it accounted for the lion’s share of the more than 1300 films produced in India during the silent period. While the majority of the Indian films in the 1910s and the early 1920s were mythologicals, other genres soon made their appearance: the devotional, centering on the lives of quasi-historical religious figures; the fantasy film; the

12 Following Sanjay Joshi’s *Fractured Modernity: Making of a Middle Class in Colonial North India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), I use this term to indicate a group of people who, through similarities in social, economic, or cultural background (e.g., western education and professional affiliations) became involved in a new kind of cultural politics in colonial India, which enabled them to claim a certain social authority and to initiate new modes of political activity that empowered them against the traditional elites and less powerful social groups, and eventually against the British.

13 Homi Bhabha, “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi Bhabha (London & New York: Routledge, 1990), 299.

14 Ashish Rajadhyaksha, “Indian Cinema,” in *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, ed. John Hill & Pamela Church Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 560.

social, depicting stories of “modern life”; the historical, based on heroic episodes of Indian history; the stunt film; the comedy; the literary adaptation; and the crime film. Unfortunately, decades of neglect and the inevitability of nitrate decay have virtually wiped out the entire output of Indian silent cinema, leaving only a handful of films and a few fragments.¹⁵ However, thanks to the British colonial bureaucracy’s habit of setting up committees to investigate matters of public and administrative concern, we have a meticulously researched and documented record (running to 3,300 pages or so) of the world of these lost films, albeit one that is refracted through elite perceptions and prejudices.

Colonial Anxieties: The Formation of the Indian Cinematograph Committee.

On October 6, 1927, the Government of India announced the appointment of a committee of inquiry, the Indian Cinematograph Committee (henceforth to be referred to as the ICC). Consisting of three British and three Indian members, the committee was chaired by Diwan Bahadur T. Rangachariar, a prominent Tamil lawyer from Madras. The terms of reference of the ICC were summarized thus in the mandating resolution (Resolution of the Government of India, Home Department (Political), dated Simla, the sixth of October 1927, No. D.-4169):

- 1) to examine the organisation and the principles and methods of the censorship of cinematograph films in India;
- 2) to survey the organisation for the exhibition of cinematograph films and the film-producing industry in India;
- 3) to consider whether it is desirable that steps should be taken to encourage the exhibition of films produced within the British Empire generally and the production and exhibition of Indian films in particular; and to make recommendations.

The formation of the ICC was an outcome of public debates over cinema both in British India and in England. By the early 1920s, cinema had emerged as a focus of imperial anxieties that were precipitated, in part, by the national and international political turmoil of the 1910s and the 1920s—the demand for Home Rule, the protests against the Rowlatt Acts, the massacre at Jallianwala Bagh, the Khilafat movement, mass civil disobedience movements, and the aftershocks of the Russian revolution. The Indian Cinematograph Act of 1918, and the subsequent constitution of censor boards at Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, and Rangoon, set up a basic machinery of censorship. It was primarily meant to target cinematic representations of sensitive political issues—anything that might be interpreted as a reflection of or a reference to the nationalist struggle, seditious sentiments, revolutionary uprisings, communist ideas, or anything deemed offensive to Hindu or Muslim religious sensibilities.¹⁶ In practice, the censor boards tended to focus on Indian productions, which accounted for only a small

15 On silent Indian cinema, see Barnouw & Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, 1–58.

16 On political excisions in the 1920s, see Aruna Vasudev, *Liberty and License in the Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1978), 23–27.

percentage of the films exhibited in India throughout the 1920s. In 1927–1928, for instance, only 15 percent of the features released in India were Indian and 85 percent were foreign, American films accounting for the bulk of the latter.¹⁷

Not surprisingly, films from the West came to be viewed with increasing suspicion, as posing an insidious threat to the imperial prestige of the British in India. In the 1920s, the exhibition of foreign films in India came under repeated scrutiny in the British press, the Parliament, the Indian Council of States, and the Legislative Assembly in India, as well as by British reformist groups. It was feared that many of these films presented a distorted view of western civilization and discredited it in the eyes of the Indian masses, thereby inadvertently undermining the claims of the British to moral authority and the very basis of colonial rule in India. Much of the criticism was directed at “cheap American films” which, through their depiction of “sensational and daring murders, crimes, and divorces,” allegedly “held up Europeans to ridicule and lowered the native estimation of the white woman.”¹⁸ A particular concern was that the majority of the Indian audience would be unable to make the subtle distinction between an American film and a British film, and thus would mistake American debauchery as an index of the moral bankruptcy of western civilization in general.

These recurring debates about cinema’s questionable moral status culminated in the much-publicized visit of a delegation from the British Social Hygiene Council in 1926–1927. In a subsequent memorandum addressed to the Government of India in July 1927, this delegation identified cinema as “one of the major factors in lowering the standard of sex conduct and thereby tending to increase the dissemination of disease.”¹⁹ Around the same time, the National Council of Women in Burma reported the findings of its inquiry into the standard of films shown in Burma, calling for a more effective censorship of “crime films” and “pictures in which sex is treated with vulgarity and the physical side is over-emphasized.”²⁰ This heightened sense of cinema as a dangerous space—of illicit desires and subversive ideas that posed a serious threat to public health and to relations of colonial power and racial distinctions in British India—served as the immediate backdrop to the formation of the ICC in October 1927.

The moral considerations cited as the major impetus behind the appointment of the ICC were reinforced by more mundane ones, arising from the British film industry’s losing battle with Hollywood over the imperial and domestic film market. At the British Imperial Conference held in England a year earlier, delegates had voiced their concern about Hollywood’s hegemony within the British Empire; in response, the conference had passed a resolution urging the government to resist Hollywood by encouraging film production within the Empire, through import quotas, financial support, and other

17 *Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee 1927–1928* (Calcutta: Government of India Publication, 1928), 188. [Henceforth referred to as *Report*.]

18 *Bioscope*, September 2, 1920, 7. On imperial anxieties about images of the white woman, see Poonam Arora, “Imperilling the Prestige of the White Woman”: Colonial Anxiety and Film Censorship in British India,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 11, no. 2 (1995): 36–49.

19 *Report*, 116.

20 *Ibid.*

similar means. One of the ICC's principal tasks was to look into the desirability and the logistics of implementing this recommendation. In the course of doing so, they were also asked to investigate the development and current state of the cinema industry in India.²¹

The ICC therefore set out to study film production, distribution, and exhibition in India, public reaction to cinema, and the operation of governmental supervision. In the course of this ambitious investigation, they traveled 9,400 miles, held hearings in a dozen cities, visited production companies and movie theaters, studied the 320 written responses to the ICC questionnaire, and questioned 353 witnesses in detail. These witnesses included 114 Europeans, Anglo-Indians, and Americans, and 239 Indians. Of the Indians, 157 were described as Hindus and 82 non-Hindus; the latter included 38 Muslims, 25 Parsis, 16 Burmese, 2 Sikhs, and 1 Christian. Not surprisingly, the majority of these witnesses were male; the ICC questioned only thirty-five women, of whom sixteen were Europeans and nineteen Indians. The witnesses included members of the film industry, as well as non-industry people—government officials, educators, journalists, lawyers, and concerned citizens.²² Almost all the Indian witnesses in the latter group belonged to the relatively anglicized, middle-class elite (hardly surprising given the composition of the committee, prevalent social hierarchies, and the fact that the questionnaire was issued in English). In the end, the ICC compiled the 320 written responses to the questionnaire and 353 transcriptions of the oral testimonies from witnesses, along with various lists and statistical tables, into four volumes of evidence which were published along with their 226-page report in 1928.

Reading the ICC Documents: Traces of Reception. Given the paucity of historical sources and scholarship on silent cinema in India, the ICC report and the accompanying volumes of evidence comprise an important source of information about this period of Indian film history. However, the value of these documents lies not only in the “factual” information that they provide about film production, exhibition, distribution, and censorship in India in the 1910s and the 1920s, but, in what they reveal about the cultural reception of cinema in India—more specifically about the impact that cinema had on elite perceptions of the public.²³ That said, the ICC documents do not provide a transparent window into, or an unbiased overview of, a lost world. The views represented in the oral and written testimonies of the witnesses are those of elites, and the information summarized in the report is refracted through these elite perspectives and the agenda of the colonial administration. However, these very biases and filters also make these documents useful for unlocking a particularly influential elite discourse about spectatorship, class, and the nation.

21 On the film policy debates surrounding the formation of the ICC, see Priya Jaikumar's *Cinema at the End of Empire: A Politics of Transition* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

22 *Report*, 13–14.

23 My understanding of “reception” has been partly shaped by Yuri Tsivian's approach to “cultural reception” in *Early Cinema in Russia and its Cultural Reception* (London: Routledge, 1994), as a set of “active, creative, interventionist, or even aggressive” responses that reflect on films and their meanings rather than simply reacting to them (p. 1).

As Stephen Hughes points out, the ICC provided “a unique forum,” albeit one that was shaped by the committee’s agenda, in which government officials, members of the film industry, and elite colonial citizens/subjects (British and Indian, loyalists and nationalists) debated the cinema (as well as the Committee’s brief) from a variety of positions and perspectives.²⁴ Even though the committee was instituted by the British government, the elite Indians who appeared before it (out of their own volition) clearly saw this as an opportunity to make their voices heard and to present their views of, and recommendations about, what they deemed to be an increasingly important space of public culture. Moreover, the committee members seem to have approached their task in a spirit of critical inquiry and with a relatively open mind, and thus engaged in a genuine dialogue (and at times heated debate) with the interviewees and even each other. As such, the written statements and especially the transcripts of oral evidence (which preserve the inflections of dialogue and debate) can be read as the record of a moderated conversation that brought into sharp focus elite perceptions of, and anxieties about, the mass audience created by cinema in colonial India. There is no unified discourse about spectatorship in the transcripts, but there is a notable recurrence of certain patterns, preoccupations, images, and assumptions across differences of opinion, and reading these patterns against other primary sources and in the light of relevant historical scholarship can help us to reconstruct (if only partially) the responses of the Indian middle-class elites to the emergence of a mass audience.²⁵

A Committee in Search of an Audience. The questionnaire designed by the ICC and the questions posed by the committee members during the interviews posited the “Indian audience” as a principal object of inquiry. The very amorphousness of this audience seems to have sparked an almost obsessive interest in determining the precise composition of the audience and in gauging the possible effects of cinema, especially western films, on its different segments. This investigation was framed by a preconceived distinction between “Indians of the educated classes” and the “illiterate population,” a distinction which then inflected the responses of the witnesses. Item 2.a of the questionnaire divided the audience along these lines (which, to an extent, continue to structure public discourse about cinema in India to this day): “In your experience to what extent do Indians (1) of the educated classes and (2) of the uneducated classes frequent cinemas?”

Although the questionnaire also referred to a general “Indian audience,” asking respondents whether the exhibitors were “catering adequately for Indian audiences” (Question 4) and whether “films of Indian life, topical Indian news, and scenes (with Indian actors) depicting stories from the national literature, history, and mythology, would be more popular with Indian audiences than the prevalent Western films” (Question 6.a), repeated differentiation between the two classes of Indians undercut any notion of a homogeneous national community of filmgoers. Question 6.a, for

24 Stephen P. Hughes, “Is There Anyone Out There? Exhibition and Formation of Silent Film Audiences in South Asia” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1996), 218.

25 While my reading of the ICC documents is informed by the literature on problematizing the colonial archive, my primary goal here is not to problematize the archive, although I hope to do that to an extent through my analysis of what the documents can tell us about elite perceptions of cinema.

instance, was immediately followed by a query about which of the above films would “appeal most strongly (1) to the educated classes, and (2) to the illiterate population” (Q. 6.b). Question 27.a, which began by asking whether any of the films exhibited in India tended to “misrepresent Western civilization or to lower it in the eyes of Indians,” then zoomed in on a specific kind of Indian spectator, wondering whether it was “a fact” that films representing western life were “generally unintelligible to an uneducated Indian or . . . largely misunderstood by him.” In the second part of the questionnaire, which dealt with social aspects and control and attempted to gauge whether “any class of films” exhibited in India had a “demoralizing or otherwise injurious effect upon the public” (Question 24.a), the “uneducated Indian” emerged, along with impressionable children and adolescents, as the explicit focus of concern. As we shall see, these two supposed groups would be at the center of many of the respondents’ reflections on cinema, as well as much subsequent discourse about spectatorship in India.²⁶

While some of the witnesses argued against certain assumptions about the “uneducated Indian” implicit in the questionnaire (or in the leading questions posed by committee members) and a few tried to introduce a more nuanced notion of class into the discussion of the Indian audience, almost all of them seem to have taken the basic dichotomy—between the educated classes and the unlettered (and semi-literate) masses—for granted. Many of them, in fact, elaborated upon this categorization, drawing finer lines of distinction based on levels of education and degrees of westernization. Read together, the written statements and the oral evidence suggest that the Indian audience was commonly perceived not as a homogeneous national community but as a patchwork of disparate audiences with dissimilar, only occasionally overlapping cinematic tastes, differentiated by religious affiliation, regional differences, gender, degree of urbanity, and above all, by class. Interestingly enough, class, understood more in terms of cultural capital than as something defined by purely economic indicators, is emphasized in these accounts as the key factor responsible for the fragmented nature of the Indian cinema-going public.

The Social Topography of Cinema. Class distinctions were mapped onto a hierarchy of tastes that was reflected in the contemporary morphology of cinema theaters and spatialized in the social topography of cinema in the major urban centers. On the basis of the evidence compiled from the returns and its own inquiries, the ICC, in its final report on exhibition patterns, distinguished between “Western cinemas”—“picture-houses which cater mainly for Europeans, Anglo-Indians, and educated Indians,” screening only western films—and “those which cater for wholly Indian audiences,” showing a combination of both Indian and imported films in varying proportions. Of the 309 permanent cinemas estimated to exist in British India (77 located in provincial capitals and the rest in smaller provincial towns), the ICC was able to gather information on this count for only 271. While 64 of these 271 cinemas were described as exhibitors of western films only, the ICC put the number of “Western cinemas” at approximately 100, taking into account the fact that many of the 66 cantonment cinemas

26 *Report*, Appendix B.

would fall into this category. According to this estimate, then, the remaining 200-odd cinemas catered mainly to “wholly Indian audiences.”²⁷

As the ICC transcripts amply indicate, this distinction was hardly a value-neutral one in the eyes of contemporary filmgoers, producers, distributors, and exhibitors. The “Western cinemas” in major cities such as Bombay and Calcutta (and also in smaller towns where they existed) were commonly referred to as “first-class theaters” or “better class theaters” by those in the trade, as well as by elite spectators. These luxury cinemas, invariably located in the predominantly European or elite quarters of the city, were variously described as drawing a “cosmopolitan crowd,” “high class people,” an “educated and better class of people,” and “more sophisticated Indians”; accordingly, they were said to screen not just western films but “only high-class features” or “the superior class of western features.”²⁸

At the other end of the spectrum (and often at the other end of town, as well) were the “Indian theaters,” which were seen as “pander[ing] to the lower taste of the masses” or to the cinematic cravings of the “millhands and the coolies and the lower classes,”²⁹ also characterized as “the rougher elements of the city.”³⁰ Their appetites, as described by exhibitors and elite observers, seem to have run not only to Indian films (mythologicals, romances, historical films, and the emerging genres of the crime film and the social drama) but to less valorized western films as well—“those interminable serials, full of episodes of rough riding, reckless daring, and hairbreadth escapes,” “blood-and-thunder action films,” and crude slapstick.³¹ The appellation “Indian theater,” therefore, seems to have been derived more from the audience profile than from the exhibition programs of these theaters. However, as exhibitors such as Dorabji hastened to point out, the foreign films screened at these theaters were “not necessarily the same ones as in the western theaters.”³² “Indian” and “western,” in other words, were not merely descriptive terms but fraught with troubling assumptions about what truly constituted the Indian and the western.

In between these two poles were theaters of middling respectability, patronized by the petit bourgeoisie, as well as by the urban poor. Location was obviously an important factor in regulating the repertoire of a theater and in determining the class composition of its audience. The social topography of cinema in the urban centers was shaped by the patterns of colonial urbanization in British India.³³ In Bombay, for instance, western cinemas were concentrated in the predominantly European and elite Fort area. According to most of the witnesses, the proportion of “the illiterate classes” seemed to increase as one moved northward into the less fashionable neighborhoods;

27 *Report*, 20.

28 The relationship between the ranking of a theater and perceptions of the quality of its films was somewhat tautological. As the chairman of the ICC admitted, the fact that a picture had been shown by a first-class theater gave “a sort of advertisement to the picture which you can never get from anywhere else” (*ICC, Evidence*, vol. 2, 697).

29 *ICC: Evidence*, vol. 1, 675.

30 *ICC: Evidence*, vol. 1, 376.

31 *ICC: Evidence*, vol. 1, 376 & 563.

32 *ICC: Evidence*, vol. 1, 350.

33 For a history of urbanization in British India, see R. Ramachandran, *Urbanization and Urban Systems in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 60–69.

the cinemas on Lamington Road and Sandhurst Road were said to draw Indians of the non-westernized middle class and the lower middle classes, while those further north, in the working-class areas of Parel and Dadar, were described as catering to “millhands and coolies.”³⁴ The social topography of cinema in other urban centers followed a similar pattern. In Calcutta, where a percentage of the local Bengali elite reportedly patronized certain kinds of Indian films, especially local productions (a tendency variously attributed to stronger nationalist leanings, regional chauvinism, or the better quality of the Bengali productions in comparison to Bombay films), “quality” Bengali films were occasionally screened at some of the western cinemas. However, all the western theaters were located in Chowringhee, even now locally known as *saheb para* in Bengali (literally, “the white neighborhood”). H. A. J. Gidney, an Anglo-Indian resident of Calcutta, divided the cinemas in Calcutta into “the west end cinema and the east end cinema,” claiming that though there was “certainly a line dividing some cinemas from others,” it marked “a separation of choice, not exclusion.”³⁵ Gidney’s emphasis on volition, however, glossed over the fact that the lines of apparent choice were over-determined by socio-economic exclusions and inequalities.

Across the Great Divide. What is striking as one goes through the volumes of ICC evidence is that the dividing lines of taste emphasized or invoked most often by the witnesses, as well as by the committee members, did not primarily pertain to the racial distinction between the colonizers and the colonized, but, rather, to rifts within the Indian social formation. Of these, the chasm supposedly separating the westernized elite from the rest of the Indian population received the most attention. This was how the ICC characterized (and reified) it as they summed up their findings about tastes:

The taste of *the Westernised Indian and of the Indian who has some knowledge of English and acquaintance with Western ideas* [emphasis added] is akin to that of the European and generally the same films whether social dramas, comedies, or whatever they may be, which are popular in the West, are appreciated by this section of the community. *The bulk of the population, however, which is insufficiently acquainted with the English language and with Western ideas* [emphasis added], enjoys films with plenty of action, especially comic and adventure films, but finds no attraction in the social dramas. This is natural enough; being unable to read the captions, which are almost always in English, they derive their entertainment from watching the “stunts,” comic or adventurous. . . . [T]he social drama, depending very often for its appeal on some matrimonial entanglement or other complications of an entirely alien social life, is quite unintelligible to an audience of this class, who can neither read the captions nor follow the action. At one time, the “serials” which consist of sensational and thrilling episodes . . . were the most popular type of film with this class of audience. The “serial” however has lost its former popularity and has been largely supplanted by the Indian films.³⁶

34 *ICC: Evidence*, vol. 1. On cinema halls in colonial Bombay, see Kaushik Bhaumik, “The Emergence of the Bombay Film Industry, 1913–1936” (PhD diss., Oxford, 2001), 24–29.

35 *ICC: Evidence*, vol. 2, 1082.

36 *Report*, 21–22.

The cultural divide referred to here was created, to a large extent, by nineteenth-century colonial educational policies, which introduced English as the “high” language of colonial modernity vis-à-vis the “native vernaculars.”³⁷ As Veena Naregal points out in her study of the hierarchical relations between English and vernacular spheres in Maharashtra between 1830 and 1881, these policies “altered the universe of communicative and cultural practices on the subcontinent, and introduced crucial hierarchical and ideological divisions between the newly-educated and ‘illiterate,’ ‘English-knowing’ and ‘vernacular-speaking’ sections of native society.”³⁸ By the late 1920s (when the ICC conducted its investigation), the cultural hierarchies created by the colonial education project had become firmly entrenched and naturalized—as is evident from the casual and axiomatic manner of their invocation in the ICC documents.

The transcripts and the written statements indicate that the witnesses and the committee members used the words “westernized,” “cultured,” and “sophisticated” interchangeably with “educated,” making it obvious that “the educated Indian” was defined not so much by his or her formal level of education (though that did matter) as by a particular habitus, an orientation toward the west and access to certain kinds of cultural capital (usually acquired through a certain kind of education).³⁹ Distaste for Indian films was widely cited, mostly in approving tones, as a distinguishing characteristic of the “educated classes” and generally attributed to their superior powers of discrimination and to the inferior quality of Indian productions:

The educated classes, however, owing to their cultivated and better taste, naturally prefer English or American films, which have to their credit many points of superiority over the Indian films. (S. K. Naique, Bombay, Honorary General Secretary of the Aryan Excelsior League)⁴⁰

There have been very few films made in India that would appeal to the educated classes. (Ardeshir Bilimoria, Director, Madan Theatres, Ltd., Bombay Circle)⁴¹

They [Indian films] are of a very amateurish and elementary standard as compared to the western films . . . only popular with the masses who cannot understand and appreciate foreign films. (A. V. Row, Sub-agent, Universal Pictures Corporation of New York, Calcutta)⁴²

A few witnesses were somewhat more ambivalent about the educated Indian’s cinematic preferences, reading these as an index of his alienation from Indian traditions, but even they did not challenge the intrinsic excellence of his taste or the avowed

37 See Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in Colonial India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

38 Veena Naregal, *Language Politics, Elites, and the Public Sphere* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), 4.

39 On “habitus,” see Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique on the Judgment of Taste* (1979), trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

40 ICC: *Evidence*, vol. 1, 144.

41 ICC: *Evidence*, vol. 1, 322–323.

42 ICC: *Evidence*, vol. 2, 702.

superiority of western films.⁴³ While trying to explain the sociological roots of this taste, Pherozezshah J. Marzban of Bombay (editor of the weekly *Jam-e-Jamshed*), for instance, lamented the fact that the “educated cinemagoer” was “more saturated with English literature and history than, unfortunately, his own national literature and history.” He concluded, however, by asserting that the standards of excellence to which the educated Indian had become accustomed through his overexposure to the art of the West made him particularly sensitive to “the shortcomings of Indian productions.”⁴⁴

In general, Indian films were constantly compared to western films, especially the “superior class of western features” popular with the educated Indian and the European elite and were found to be deficient on almost all counts: “technically defective,” “very amateurish and of elementary standard,” “full of a good deal of overacting which does not much appeal to the cultured taste.”⁴⁵ While all the witnesses acknowledged the growing popularity of Indian films, most of them attributed it to the depraved tastes of the masses and to their inability to understand and appreciate foreign films. They tended to agree with Marzban that “for a film to be generally popular in India what would be needed is not supreme excellence but a level of production comprehensible by the average Indian mind.”⁴⁶ The “average Indian mind,” it was widely agreed, had rather limited powers of comprehension: “it rarely cares to see behind the story and takes for granted that the acting is what it should be.” This intellectual deficiency and an imagination that tended to get “caught and carried away by stunts and fights” (an allusion to the popularity of serials and swashbucklers at the lower-end theaters) were seen as the defining characteristics of “the Indian audience.”⁴⁷

In these accounts of the Indian audience, and in the concomitant and self-congratulatory construction of the educated Indians as a class apart, being “Indian” seemed to be more a matter of poor taste and bad habits than of anything else. Constant comparisons between the predilections of the “Indian” audience and those of the “educated Indian” or the “educated man” ended up naturalizing the masses as the “real” Indians, even though their supposed authenticity was coded negatively, and reinforcing, albeit positively, the image of the westernized elite as a deracinated group, “not really Indian.” Correspondingly, Indian cinema came to be overwhelmingly associated with the masses (whatever the actual class composition of the audiences for these films might have been), making mass appeal an index of a film’s “Indianness.” Even a cursory look at film periodicals (such as *Deepali*, *Filmland*, *Filmindia*, etc.) and writings on film from the late 1920s and the 1930s indicate that these linkages were not just limited to the pages of the ICC documents but had become commonplace in the discourse about Indian cinema by the late 1920s. This dichotomy between the elite and the masses, cast in terms of national authenticity, continues to haunt popular and

43 Not only did the ICC consistently refer to the Indian spectator as “he,” contemporary Indian audiences were predominantly male.

44 *ICC: Evidence*, vol. 1, 473.

45 *Ibid.*, 473.

46 *Ibid.*, 472.

47 *Ibid.*, 594.

scholarly discourse about cinema in India even now, although the valence of the terms may have changed.⁴⁸

While the working-class profile of early audiences in America became one of the most powerful founding myths of Hollywood, “a persistent cliché in the legitimation of film as a ‘democratic’ art and ‘popular’ culture,” the class hierarchies structuring the colonial social formation in India and the westernized elite’s ambivalent relation to the masses gave Indian cinema a different position vis-à-vis the existing public spheres.⁴⁹ The growing mass base of Indian films was, in fact, taken to be irrefutable confirmation of their inferior quality and stigmatized them even more in the eyes of a certain section of the Indian elite and the exhibitors catering to this group. Dorabji’s reluctance to exhibit Indian films (mentioned at the beginning of this essay), especially the more popular ones, at the Wellington out of a fear of tarnishing his theater’s image and losing customers was not an isolated instance of unabashed elitism but fairly typical of owners and managers of luxury cinemas in urban centers. A. Soares, the principal of Antonio De Souza High School in Bombay, perceptively pointed out that these exhibitors were “afraid of losing caste as it were” by screening Indian films.⁵⁰

The Audience in the Gallery. However, in spite of their reluctance to screen Indian films, the managers of even the most prestigious western cinemas did not seem to have been entirely successful in (or wholly committed to, because of obvious financial considerations) keeping “the Indian masses” out of their hallowed precincts, although they did manage to segregate the masses from the “better class of audience” through the pricing of seats. According to the testimony of exhibitors, government inspectors, and elite patrons of the western cinemas, members of the “poorer classes”—“mill-hands, coolies, and cab drivers”—frequented the cheapest section of these theaters, commonly referred to as the gallery or the third class.

This section was also a favorite with young male students, who increasingly accounted for a significant proportion of the urban audience. The audience in the gallery thus blurred the lines of distinction mapped onto the urban topography of cinema and the stratified social space of the theater. As several disapproving reports indicate, they also blithely transgressed the protocols of decorous spectatorship, making their presence felt through whistles, catcalls, cheers, and loud comments, bringing the carnivalesque culture of the bazaar into the bourgeois confines of the elite theaters.

The gulf between the gallery and the sections reserved for elite patrons—the balcony and the boxes—is referred to in this amusing vignette from J. B. H. Wadia’s memoir, *Those Were the Days*. Wadia grew up in Bombay and claimed to have spent the weekends of his boyhood (in the 1910s and the early 1920s) at the cinema with his friends, visiting the major theaters in the Fort area. They watched four to five films on Saturday and Sunday. He provides us with a vivid description of the segregated space

48 Ravi Vasudevan, “Introduction,” *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*, ed. Ravi Vasudevan (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3–6.

49 Miriam Hansen, “Early Cinema? Whose Public Sphere?” *New German Critique* 29 (Spring/Summer 1983): 147–184.

50 *ICC: Evidence*, vol. 1, 378.

of the theaters, contrasting the exuberance and chaos of the gallery (where he and his friends sat) with the atmosphere of elegance and calm that prevailed in the balcony:

The doors would be thrown open. . . . Then there would be a veritable stampede of cinemagoers [those holding tickets to the second and third classes] in the auditorium. The gold rush sequence which we sometimes saw in the Western was like a cake-walk dance compared to our adventure. So it seemed to us, at least. Then I would try to secure the best seats possible on the wooden benches by laying myself prostrate on one of them. This was the accepted technique for reservation of seats in those days. . . . In result [*sic*] and for about the first half a minute or so one witnessed the strange spectacle of the first batch of cinegoers all lying supine and glued to their respective areas, motionless like so many corpses. . . . But as soon as their friends turned up they would jump up and accommodate them. The next to turn up were the doorkeepers. The speed with which they collected our tickets was certainly worth watching. It revealed a close parallel to the actions of Keystone Cops on the screen cranked by the cameraman at slow speed of about six frames per second instead of the normal sixteen frames.

However the elite in the balcony and box received V.I.P. treatment in several first-run houses. The doorkeeper would enter pompously as if he was a superstar coming on the stage from the wings holding a silver *pigani* (spray) of rosewater in his hand. He would then walk from one end to the other, sprinkling it liberally on and over the occupants who would go into a fitting reverie as if they had been supplied with Hashish. Those enterprising Parsee exhibitors, the Wellington Brothers (Seth Rustomji⁵¹ and Seth Ruttonsha Dorabji) would even present rosebuds to each of their regular patrons; and in the splendid Indian way of life not only enquire of their health but also of their entire families.⁵²

The air of old-world sophistication (reminiscent more of a soiree than of a film-show) that the management of elite theaters sought to create in the balcony was, however, constantly disrupted by the gallery audience's vociferous enjoyment of, and kinesthetic responses to, the show:

Those few fortunate ones who had a smattering of the language [English] would read aloud [the titles] and translate them in a Babel of their respective vernaculars for the benefit of those who did not know the common language of the British Empire. . . . When the dyed-in-the-wool villain of the piece tried to play funny with the chastity-belted heroine . . . we would threaten the lecherous assaulter with dire consequences if he did not keep away from the defenseless weaker sex. We would hail a verbal hailstorm of such forceful obscenities as had no place in the respectable dictionaries of the day.

51 This is the same Rustomji Dorabji whom I quote earlier in this essay.

52 J. B. H. Wadia, "Those Were the Days," *Cinema Vision India* 1, no. 1 (January 1980), 91–92.

When the hero cropped up in the nick of time like a veritable *deus ex machina* and gave the villain the thrashing of his life, we would jump in our seats and welcome the saviour with massive ejaculations of “Dey, dey—Maar Saaley ko” [Rough translation: “Come on, sock it to the bastard!”] etc. etc. The pandemonium we raised was so deafening that it would have drowned the wildest of cacophony in a modern discotheque.⁵³

For many of the young school and college students in the audience, the homosocial space of the gallery offered a temporary respite from the conventions of middle-class propriety that governed their daily lives. The magic of the movies was enhanced by the high spirits, colorful personalities, and easy camaraderie of their proletarian fellow-spectators. Buddhadev Basu’s nostalgic recollection of his moviegoing experience as a schoolboy in Dhaka (in eastern Bengal) in the late 1910s and early 1920s evokes some of the enchantment that the gallery held for these middle-class adolescents and deserves to be cited at some length:

I became addicted to the cinema after I moved to Dhaka; the Armanitola Picture House, the only movie theater in the city at that time, soon became one of my favorite haunts. . . . The theater, with its tin roof and unadorned white-washed walls, resembled a warehouse rather than a glamorous pleasure palace. . . . I never missed a single film, even though sometimes it wasn’t easy to get hold of the four annas that transported me to a fantastic land twice a week.

Serials, with their spectacular thrills and non-stop action, were a regular feature of the shows at the Picture House. I remember watching countless episodes starring the valiant Eddie Polo, the heroic Elmo Lincoln, and of course, the great Tarzan from my precarious perch on a crowded bench, the air redolent with the smell of the bidis smoked by my neighbors in the four-anna section—the coachmen, masons, and street vendors colloquially known as *kuttis* in Dhaka. The *kuttis* could not read the English titles, nor did they have any idea of where Africa or America was located, but they were the most empathetic and vocal spectators in the audience. They were quick to figure out what’s happening in the film and why, clapped in unison, and constantly talked back to the characters on the screen, offering collective advice and encouragement to the hero/heroine, berating the villains with their choicest curse-words, and punctuating the action with cheers and catcalls. A chorus of piercing whistles always accompanied the climactic kiss and went on long after the kiss ended and the lights came on. Whenever I think of the Picture House, I recall the *kuttis* with their penchant for verbal pyrotechnics, fluency in cursing, ready wit, and hybrid lingo (a blend of Dhakai Bengali and broken Urdu that was as sharp and cutting as a coachman’s whip): arch-bohemians in their outward appearance, surfing along on a wave of merriment, apparently without a care in the world or a thought for tomorrow.⁵⁴

53 Wadia, “Those Were the Days,” 92–93.

54 Buddhadev Basu, *Amar Chhelebelā* [My Boyhood] (Calcutta: M.C. Sarkar, 1973), 536–538. My translation. Basu (1908–1974) was a poet, novelist, essayist, and literary critic, as well as a key figure of the modernist movement in Bengal.

The anarchic spirit that the young Basu and many of his peers found so appealing in the rambunctious audience in the gallery was precisely what many of their elders found so distasteful and worrisome about the public space of cinema. I find the concept of the *bazaar*, especially as elaborated by the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, particularly useful in thinking about elite responses to the emergence of the “Indian audience.” Chakrabarty uses the term “bazaar” (literally, marketplace) to denote “the paradigmatic form of the outside” in India—“an unenclosed, exposed, and interstitial outside that acts as the meeting point of several communities” and combines the purpose of economic exchange with those of popular recreation and social interaction.⁵⁵ In historical scholarship on colonial India, the bazaar emerges as one of the most public of spaces in Indian cities and towns—and as a persistent focus of both colonialist and nationalist concerns about dirt and disorder.⁵⁶ As Chakrabarty points out, the congested, chaotic, and volatile space of the bazaar contradicted all the norms of the bourgeois civic order espoused by both the British administration and the nationalist elite (albeit for different reasons) and frustrated all attempts to transform it into a benign, disciplined, regulated place, “clean and healthy, incapable of producing either disease or disorder.”⁵⁷ While the British saw it as the breeding-ground of epidemics and sedition, the nationalist elite saw the bazaar primarily as an epitome of the troubling habits and practices of a burgeoning urban underclass that represented one of the major challenges to its authority. The control and regulation of urban space and efforts to make the poor conform, in their use of public space, to emerging bourgeois notions of order and hygiene, were, in fact, central to the assertion of middle-class social supremacy in the city.⁵⁸

Elite accounts of the rowdiness of the gallery audience and Dorabji’s depiction of the Indian audience as a threat to public health can be seen as part of this contemporary discourse about the bazaar as a site of unsanitary practices, social deviance, and moral decay, “a place against which one needs protection.”⁵⁹ The major risk, in the case of cinema, was linked to the images of modernity that it purveyed to spectators. For the ICC witnesses who worried about the demoralizing effects of cinema and especially western films, the boisterous, mixed crowd in the gallery embodied their worst fears about cinema, bringing together as it did the two groups that they believed to be at the greatest moral risk and the most susceptible to what they characterized as cinema’s lure of modernity: youth and the “illiterate classes.”

Contagious Modernity: The “Nation” at Risk. Both critics and supporters of cinema realized that going to the movies, especially in a country like India, was an

55 Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Garbage, Modernity, and the Citizen’s Gaze,” in *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 71–75.

56 See, for instance, Anand Yang, *Bazaar India: Markets, Society, and the Colonial State* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), and Veena Talwar Oldenburg, *The Making of Colonial Lucknow* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

57 Chakrabarty, “Garbage, Modernity, and the Citizen’s Gaze,” 77.

58 Sudipta Kaviraj, “Filth and the Public Sphere: Concepts and Practices About Space in Calcutta,” *Public Culture* 10, no. 1 (Fall 1997): 83–114.

59 Chakrabarty, “Garbage, Modernity, and the Citizen’s Gaze,” 74.

experience of virtual travel.⁶⁰ The power and the peril of films were seen to lie in the kind of access they provided—to anyone who could pay the minimum price of admission—to other worlds and lifestyles otherwise unattainable. Jadunath Mazumdar of Calcutta spoke approvingly of cinema as an educational medium of virtual travel: “If India wishes to be in touch with the whole world, I think the cinema is necessary as a medium of education. . . . In my own case I have read of America in books but one scene in the cinema conveys a much greater idea of America than all the books that I have read.”⁶¹

Karamchand Bulachand, director of a traveling library of educational films, agreed that cinema, with its ability to “speak in universal language to the masses,” had enormous pedagogical potential, but wondered about the kind of education actually being imparted in the movie theaters.⁶² Many of the witnesses felt that cinema was injecting the most vulnerable imaginations in the audience—those of the uneducated Indians and the young—with the contagion of a pernicious “modernity,” usually presented as those “customs of the West” that are “undesirable for Indians and should be kept out of India as long as [they] can be.”⁶³ The committee spent a considerable amount of time probing these concerns; the chairman, especially, was quite anxious to find out more about the nature and impact of the “new ideas” being transmitted by cinema: “New forms of morality, new ideas about the relations between the sexes? Are we getting worse by going to the cinema? Can we attribute any demoralizing effect to the cinema?”⁶⁴

An unthinking emulation of western habits and lifestyles, especially on the part of the young, was one of the most dreaded of these demoralizing effects. Dorabji, the proprietor of several Bombay theaters, claimed that some of his younger clients saw the cinema as a place where they could take lessons in the ways of the modern (western) world: “As far as the educated youths are concerned, I have heard from some of my audience that they have learnt from my films how a man should dance, how he gets drunk, how to carry himself.”⁶⁵ These, however, were not regarded as the most dangerous lessons that cinema had to offer. A matter of greater concern was what illiterate Indians and impressionable children and adolescents, whose minds had not yet been “developed by education,” might be learning from the images of romance and sexuality rife in western films:

We can all understand the significance of those kisses and love-making scenes, but others may not, especially children. We understand the social habits and customs of the westerners, but the illiterate people and the children do not,

60 This dimension of the cinema was emphasized by Walter Benjamin in his 1936 essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 236, and more recently, by historians/theorists of early cinema. See, for instance, Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994); Giuliana Bruno, “Site-seeing: Architecture and the Moving Image,” *Wide Angle* 19, no. 4, 8–24; and Lynne Kirby, *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

61 *ICC: Evidence*, vol. 2, 655.

62 *ICC: Evidence*, vol. 1, 691.

63 *Ibid.*, 481.

64 *Ibid.*, 390.

65 *Ibid.*, 353.

and it may be an encouragement to them to imitate the westerners. . . . I have seen people, especially students, loudly cheering on seeing some of the sex films which were strongly criticized and commented upon by elderly people. . . . It may be encouraging them to adopt vicious ways by copying western standards and customs before their minds are developed by education.⁶⁶

Khagendra Nath Mitter, a professor at Calcutta's Presidency College, expresses similar concerns in a written statement about the "insidious way" in which "western modes of life—particularly the seamy side of it," were being "directly introduced among people who are still in an impressionable stage":

So long western civilization directly affected the upper classes to some extent and a few others who went to foreign countries for purposes of education, commerce, etc. Now the cinema is exposing with all its characteristic vividness the manners and customs, the prejudices and passions, the vices and crimes of western peoples. To my mind the subconscious influence of cinema is far more mischievous in its potentiality than conscious influence. . . . It is not only sex stories, not even anarchical or revolutionary crime stories that count so much, but it is the undercurrent of insidious influence which has to be dreaded most. For in the long run it may so modify our own culture and traditions that all that is best in them may be swept away by that undercurrent.⁶⁷

Mitter's fears about cinema's undertow of modernity indicates an awareness of the fact that the appeal of western, especially Hollywood, films resided not so much in their content but, as Miriam Hansen suggests in "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," in the way in which they made available to audiences' "hitherto unperceived modes of sensory perception and experience" and in their ability to suggest, through images and affect, novel ways of organizing everyday life and social relations.⁶⁸

Fears about cinema's role as a purveyor of the new, and its potential for destabilizing social, sexual, and gender relations, were, of course, not unique to India. The terms in which these fears were expressed, however, were inflected by the particular tensions of Indian modernity that Partha Chatterjee highlights in his discussion of the cultural project of Indian nationalism. This project involved dividing the world of social practices and institutions into an "outside" and an "inside." The former was the domain of statecraft, economy, science, and technology, where the west was acknowledged as superior and emulated; the latter was the arena of language, aesthetic conventions, family relations, and gender roles, where nationalist elites staked their claims to sovereignty and attempted to forge identities simultaneously "Indian" and "modern."⁶⁹ The vehemence of some of the critiques of cinema discussed above can, perhaps, be attributed in part to a perception that cinema was intruding into the inner sanctum of Indian identity and thereby undermining the very basis of the nation.

66 ICC: *Evidence*, vol. 2, 1015.

67 ICC: *Evidence*, vol. 4, 141.

68 Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," *modernism/modernity* 6, no. 2 (April 1999): 72.

69 Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 3–13.

Cinema's ability to take people traveling beyond the bounds of their everyday lives was feared as a potential source of not just cultural confusion but of social discontent as well. S. K. Bhaduri, an erstwhile college professor and famous theater personality from Calcutta, was particularly eloquent about this side effect of cinematic travel, especially on the minds of youth:

I am of the opinion that western films, British or American, have a deleterious effect on the mind of the younger people generally. It is not that they are immoral or criminally suggestive. The fact is that the whole atmosphere of these films engender in the minds of our young men heightened notions of life, of ease, of creature comforts generally unsettling their minds and producing in them a vague sense of discontent with their actual environments. Speaking from my personal experience of college men in the last two decades I can state with the greatest emphasis that this is a very serious and real danger.⁷⁰

In his oral evidence, he elaborated on the notion of cinema as an engine of discontent by invoking a stereotypical figure in Indian fiction—the young man from the provinces who comes to the big city for education:

Bhaduri [B.]: His father earns Rs sixty a month, he lives in a mud hut; he comes here, he lives in a hostel four storeys high, he has the benefit of the electric light, he goes and looks at the cinema, he looks at the background—furnished houses, hotel lounges, this and that, scenes of Monte Carlo.

Questioner [Q]: So he acquires an aversion for village life?

B.: Yes.

Q: But that he gets by seeing Calcutta itself, by seeing the hotels, Firpo's, etc.⁷¹

B.: He'll never get inside Firpo's.

Q: He looks at the show windows of the houses here—Whiteway Laidlaw's⁷²—and he sees all those things.

B: The cinema brings all this very directly before his eyes.

Bhaduri's imagined scenario (which presents a compressed narrative version of some of the dominant themes in current scholarship on cinema and modernity, especially the theme of what Anne Friedberg calls "mobilized visuality") emphasized an essential aspect of colonial or peripheral modernity: the fact that an enhancement of the ability to imagine new lives was not usually accompanied with a proportionate

70 *ICC: Evidence*, vol. 3, 56.

71 Firpo's, an expensive restaurant in Chowringhee (the heart of Calcutta's European quarter), was synonymous with "the dream life" of modernity in colonial Calcutta.

72 An elite department store, Whiteway Laidlaw's was another of Calcutta's emblematic institutions of modernity.

increase in the material resources necessary (on a personal as well as on a social level) for translating these imaginings into reality. By providing virtual access to otherwise unattainable worlds, cinema was seen as fostering a dangerous discontent with the status quo, liable to erupt—especially in the case of the masses—into social unrest and political violence. These fears, and the tendency to group youth with the urban masses, take on an added significance in light of the fact that by the late 1920s educated students in the cities and industrial workers were tending to identify with the more radical ideologies and organizations both within and outside the mainstream nationalist movement led by the Congress. In fact, the discursive construction of the mass audience in the ICC documents cannot be fully understood without at least a brief reference to the broader socio-political landscape of the 1920s.

Conclusion: The Audience Outside the Lettered City. The contradictory elite discourse about the mass audience, simultaneously constructing it as active (a source of disorder) and passive (at risk of being corrupted by cinema), needs to be situated in the context of the emergence of the “urban poor” as a political force and an analytical category in India in the interwar years. As social historian Nandini Gooptu has documented, various parts of the subcontinent underwent extensive urbanization and demographic expansion during these years, and towns became central to political developments in the country with the poor coming to play a pivotal role.⁷³ The emergence of the urban poor into the public spheres of mass politics and production was accompanied by the development of the analytical category of the “urban poor” in elite discourse:

Administrative or state politics and middle-class perceptions in the interwar period increasingly tended to identify the laboring classes of the towns as a homogenized category of the poor. In contrast to the rural masses, the urban poor were often seen as a distinct social segment, sharing undesirable traits and posing a threat to moral and social order, public health and political stability. At the same time, the expansion of representative and mass politics after the First World War encouraged a rhetorical reference to the “poor” as the wider normative political constituency whom all parties or political formations claimed to represent.⁷⁴

These contradictory impulses—especially the tension between elite projects of social control and the political imperative of mobilizing mass support—can be seen as shaping the ways in which the ICC and its witnesses construct, categorize, and analyze the “Indian audience.”⁷⁵

73 In *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 2–3, Gooptu defines the “urban poor” as comprising “not just factory workers but manual workers in the bazaars and in a host of small-scale manufacturing units; artisans and craftspeople; transport and construction workers; hawkers, street vendors and pedlars; and service groups such as sweepers and municipal workers.”

74 *Ibid.*, 3–4.

75 See Joshi, *Fractured Modernity*, for an analysis of the middle-class elite’s ambivalent relation to subaltern groups.

While Gooptu and other historians have rightly emphasized the key role of representative and mobilizational politics in focusing attention on the urban poor, they tend to overlook the prominent supporting role that cinema played in this process.⁷⁶ A contextual analysis of the ICC documents suggests that cinema's emergence as a public sphere also contributed to the increasing visibility of the urban masses in the interwar period, not just as a political constituency or a labor force, but as a distinctive community of consumers as well. In the public space of cinema, the abstract collective invoked in nationalist rhetoric and administrative discourse as "the people" was embodied in the form of a boisterous mass audience. They appeared (to the middle classes) to be simultaneously vulnerable and menacing, generating anxieties about how they might put the lessons learned from cinema into practice, beyond the bounds sanctioned by elite projects of social control and nationalist pedagogies of producing disciplined citizen-subjects. Even as the medium of cinema held out the tantalizing possibility of creating and uniting a fraternal national community through a visual appeal to pan-Indian sentiments—the public that was the ostensible target of nationalist rhetoric—the cultural distinctions reinforced and introduced by cinema, the social topography of cinema and the stratified social space of the theaters, and the specific contexts of cinematic consumption in colonial India produced a rather different kind of public space, one that was visibly fragmented by the hierarchical distinctions of the colonial order and the contradictions inherent in nationalist discourse. Thus it seems more appropriate to think of the public space of cinema in early twentieth-century India as a zone of contestations, a space of emergent identities and practices that jolted the lettered city into an uneasy awareness of what lay beyond its boundaries, and of the tension between the professed desire for a "national" cinema and elite perceptions of a divided audience. *

76 See, for instance, Ranajit Guha, "Discipline and Mobilize," in *Subaltern Studies VII*, ed. Chatterjee & G. Pandey (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 69–120; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History: Bengal, 1890–1940* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); R. S. Chandravarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay 1900–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

I would like to thank Cinema Journal's two readers, Purnima Mankekar, Akhil Gupta, Claire Fox, David Palumbo-Liu, Patricia White, and the members of the Stanford Humanities Center Workshop on Modernity and Postcoloniality for their comments, and Maitreesh Ghatak for his persistent nudging. Research for this article was made possible by an American Institute of Indian Studies dissertation research fellowship.