While the reasons for encouraging preference for British films into India are mainly economic, I would not omit from consideration arguments deriving from the political effect of good British films.
—British Economic and Overseas Department, 1934

Is it not the truth that a film which will affect the prestige of the white races in this country is a film to which objection can be taken on moral grounds in practically every case. Why drag in the purely political side?
—H. Hamill, Bombay Board of Film Censors, 1927

three  *  EMPIRE AND EMBARRASSMENT

Colonial Forms of Knowledge about Cinema

The history of British imperialism in India is a history of India’s rendition into meticulously organized data. As the anthropologist Bernard Cohn has shown, India’s governance was conditional on the colony’s comprehensibility to its foreign administrators, who interpreted and represented the colonial land, its people, and their practices through familiar matrices of grammar, history, science, and law. In British India control was an effect of instrumental and incidental knowledge-production. However, principal changes in the imperial state’s self-definition in the 1930s produced corresponding reassessments of its administrative machinery. So if the transcription of Indian legal traditions into text-based models of British case law was an important investigative modality of the state, by late empire the question of appropriate evaluative precedent was far from clear. A case from 1936 serves as a good example. That year, an Indian named Soumyendranath Tagore used the word imperialism in a speech, which led members of the Indian Intelligence Bureau and the legislative department to argue over precedents, distinguishing between cases in which the word had been deemed seditious
imperial governmentality (Emperor v. B. T. Randive, editor, Railwayman) as opposed to permissible (in speeches by Indian nationalist leaders that had not warranted arrest). Legislators determined that using the term imperialism to describe a “government as established by law in British India” was sedition. In a strong case, Tagore’s defense lawyers argued that he “never mentioned Government” and “by Imperialism he meant Capitalism.”

This incident, though minor, suggests an imperial government that rigidly proclaimed its affiliation to legal process: the key question debated was “whether an attack on imperialism amounts to an attack on the Government.” In its colonies, the British State supported perceptions of a dichotomy between government and trade by censuring accusations of state domination while tolerating public criticism of imperialist trade practices. The projected distance between the realms of politics and economics, between state power and the capitalist market, is central to understanding why an initiative that started in Britain as an exploration of potential empire film markets was always reconfigured as something else in the colony: moral concern for colonial viewers, state interest in India’s industrial development, cultural reciprocity.

In the last decade, transnational economic alliances have created global classes of privilege and destitution, provoking scholarly pronouncements about the decline of the nation-state as a “vector of historical change.” Though this may be too premature a dismissal of state power, it addresses a distinct loss in the ability of states (and multistate coalitions) to utilize overt international force in the pursuit of economic self-interest unless accompanied by moral justification. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri propose a similar argument regarding the use of morality in war, though I disagree with their periodization. A “just war,” they suggest, was linked to ancient imperial orders, which was expunged under the age of modernity and nation-states to reemerge only within the present paradigm of transnational economies. They base this argument on the premise of a complete historical rupture between the eras of colonialism and transnationalism. As with their larger thesis about the novel nature of power in what they see as today’s limitless and spatially dispersed world market, they polemically challenge the possibility of rearticulated historical continuities.

For Britain, the bureaucratization of colonies through the state’s assumption of control over diverse economic adventures in the mid-1800s occurred in tandem with (and necessitated) a suppression of the state’s investment in imperialism’s profit motives. Only when the British State formally pro-
claimed itself as the governing authority over disparate territories did it need to disaggregate the logic of administration from that of capital. Proclaimed evacuations of the state’s economic interest in foreign territorial occupation endowed respectability to the state, sacralizing the ethics of control and intervention. By the Boer wars (1899–1902), a critical counterdiscourse attacking the capacity of colonialism made the state’s economic ambitions definitively embarrassing within the metropole. The two world wars, subsequent decolonizations, the proliferation of nation-states, international courts of arbitration, and peace-keeping forces of the first half of the twentieth century further consolidated the idea that violent political intervention was defensible only when used as an ethical necessity. In a long-standing history of calling empire by other names—enterprise, uncontainable masculine energy, progress, religious salvation, civilization, what-have-you—Britain’s state-level disavowals of economic imperialism, which can be traced to the middle of the nineteenth century, added a distinctively contemporary and contemporarily moral flavor to previous mythifications.

When film historians accept at face value the British State’s use of prevalent moral and racial anxieties to authorize an investigation of the Indian film market, they overlook a host of submerged economic rationales that complicate the language of moral panic. In a psychoanalytic reading of British anxiety about racially inclusive public and on-screen spaces in India, Poonam Arora examines imperial responses to British and Hollywood melodramas that depicted multiracial images to a mixed-race crowd in Indian theaters. More in the category of social history, Prem Chowdhry’s extensive research provides insight into the censorship and reception of imperialist Hollywood and British films in India, to narrate their effects on race relations, colonial nationalism, and imperial ideology. Indeed, British state files are rife with observations about the detrimental effects of Hollywood films on colonial audiences. The following statement, issued at the international parliamentary conference “Pernicious Influence of Pictures Shown on Oriental Peoples,” which took place on 5 August 1932 in Ostend, Belgium, expressed a widely held opinion: “The simple native has a positive genius for picking up false impressions and is very deficient in the sense of proportion. By the unsophisticated Malay, Javanese or even Indian and Chinese, the scenes of crime and depravity which are thrown on the screens are accepted as faithful representations of the ordinary life of the white man in his own country.” As shockingly racist as this characterization of colonial viewership might sound to our ears, it was at the time more socially and morally legitimate for the con-
ference’s participating parliamentarians from Britain, France, Netherlands, and Japan to express concern about impressionable natives than to discuss colonial film markets in purely economic terms. While their worries may have been genuine, that anxiety nevertheless facilitated their (by then unspeakable) economic interest in the colonies.

Moral anxiety was a defensible ground for banding against American cinema’s domination of European and Asian colonies. By isolating imperial racism in our historical reconstruction, we simplify the mechanics of racism and run the risk of neglecting financial interests that acquired common cause with alarmist discourses about lower classes and darker races. We also miss the embedded contradictions of cinema under imperialism. As Chowdhry describes in careful detail, Britain’s empire cinema was offensive to Indians. At the same time, initiatives collectively referred to as “Empire film schemes” were promoted on the back of the British Films Quota Act and were premised on the belief that British filmmakers could produce commercial films that appealed to Indians. Britain’s schismatic construction of India as a land of naïve natives (provoking England’s racial fears) who were also canny consumers (promising an untapped market) coincided in its efforts to comprehend Indian cinema and its audiences.¹¹

In 1927 key points of contact between the state and the Indian film industry clustered around a state-funded fact-finding mission. Concomitant to the quota proceedings in Britain, the ICC was conducting an official inquiry in India, with a proclaimed focus on “the question of as to whether the censorship was lax and particularly whether a certain class of films were being exhibited which were harmful to the prestige of the white people.”¹² This made a compelling platform for rationalizing an investigation of the Indian film industry when economically motivated state inquiries were tactically impossible and rhetorically unmentionable in India’s nationalist climate. However, challenges to the ICC—including dissent within the committee’s inner ranks and its encounter with vocal members of the Indian film industry—created a series of fractures between and within the state and industry. If each disruption resulted in a reformulation of the state’s agenda, with the government attempting to reauthorize its role on the grounds of morality, it also demonstrated a fragmenting imperial state.

Unlike Chowdhry, I am less inclined to perceive “the coherence of the explicit message of colonialism, imperialism and racism” in British film policy and attempts “to demolish the nationalist rhetoric of one India.”¹³ Mechanisms of differentiation were incessantly at work to undermine the binaries
of imperial Britain and colonial India, producing an archive of information on colonial cinema that is not so much sealed in imperialist ideology as “co-authored” by Indians and demonstrative of imperial breakdown.\textsuperscript{14} What was initiated with imperial intent—with the FBI prevailing on the British State to seek trade privileges within the empire—could not be pursued because of challenges from within a state-sponsored agency and from a colonial film industry developing outside the limits of state control.

Beyond the adaptiveness of imperial state discourse, then, I am interested in the historical conditions of its transformation in relation to cinema. In this period, the ICC meticulously interrogated the Indian film industry, but their interrogation was accompanied by lively, if disorderly, rumors about Britain’s attempted takeover of the Indian film market. As a collective, this archive describes official (commissioned) and contingent (rumored) forms of knowledge about the British State and the Indian film industry, generated within the metropole and the colony. Each studied the other, gauged limits, and defended opposing and on occasion complicit interests in India’s film market. Much about the Indian film industry was also remained in this cycle of official reports and unofficial rumors. The arbitrations, rumors, and reactions in the wake of the commission, the shifts in the interviewers’ locations, and their elisions capture the mediations of the moment.

\textit{Commissioned Colonial Knowledge}

After the 1926 Imperial Conference’s recommendation that all empire territories undertake “remedial measures” to “encourage the exhibition of Empire films,” the government of India declared that it was “incumbent on India in common with other parts of the Empire to consider whether or not she should take any steps to give encouragement to the British Empire films.”\textsuperscript{15} Indian members of the legislature had raised questions regarding India’s film industry in previous years, but it was not until the BT prioritized empire markets that the state felt the need to issue an official directive to collate information on Indian film production and film audiences.\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{ICC’S FORMATION} * The Indian Cinematograph Committee attracted controversy from its very inception. On 14 September 1927 the home member J. Crear moved a resolution in the Indian Legislative Assembly recommending that the governor general of India appoint a committee “to examine and report on the system of censorship of cinematograph films in India and to
consider whether it is desirable that any 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.” This resolution generated several questions in the Indian legislature, “confined mainly to the question of British Empire films and the constitution of the Committee.”

The significance of such questions cannot be undermined, because they draw attention to two signature events influencing the political climate of the ICC interviews: the Government of India Act of 1919 (implemented in 1921) and the Simon Commission of 1927–28. With the Government of India Act, India’s Central Legislative Council was made bicameral, which meant that it was divided into the Legislative Assembly and the Council of State, with more Indians represented in both bodies. Provincial councils were also expanded and the electoral franchise extended to approximately five-million educated, land-owning Indians. These circumscribed inclusions of an exclusive class of Indians into the colony’s decision-making process for restricted areas of legislation (education, public health, agriculture) were reviewed by the controversial Simon Commission, whose inquiry of colonial India’s constitutional reforms overlapped with the period of the ICC interviews. Because it lacked Indian representatives, the Simon Commission’s visit to India provoked widespread demonstrations, riots, black flags, and slogans of “Simon, go back.” If Indian members of the film industry expressed suspicion about British trade initiatives in the empire, Indian members of legislature feared the creation of a state agency empowered to adjudicate for the Indian film industry on a unilateral basis, through yet another “all white” committee.

Home Secretary H. G. Haig’s resolution in the Council of State on 15 September 1927 altered the proposed cinematograph committee’s objectives, emphasizing that the question of empire preference was driven by cultural rather than trade concerns on the part of the state.

I do not think the Imperial Conference really had mainly in view trade interests at all. I think they had mainly in view the cultural and social side, and certainly the Government of India have [sic] not any trade interests in view. Their interest in the matter, so far as they have any interest at all, is simply that the proportion of films showing Empire conditions, Empire manners, should be increased. But the Government of India have [sic] come to no conclusion on this matter. They have been asked to consider the problem, and they remit the problem for the consideration of a Committee with a non-official majority and themselves express no opinion.
Each successive stage in the FBI-initiated inquiry into the possibility of a protected empire market for British films in India diluted the issue of protectionism and accentuated the question of censorship. The “non-official” majority committee promised by Haig implied that there would be some Indian representation on the committee. Despite Haig’s disclaimers, members in India’s Council of State again questioned “the implications of the reference to British Empire films.”

The committee’s intentions proved to be a source of tension throughout the interview process, eliciting defensive statements from committee members and guarded responses from witnesses. Thus when the ICC’s newly nominated Indian Chairman Dewan Bahadur T. Rangachariair made his inaugural speech, he repeated that the committee was only “incidentally” interested in the possibility of creating Indian quotas for empire films. He assured an interviewee, “The whole origin of this committee is due to agitation that there was a certain amount of misrepresentation of Western life so serious as to lower the prestige of the Westerner in the East.” He explained, “When members examine you, you should not understand it in the light of a cross-examination in court. This is not our object here. We want enlightenment... so please do not misunderstand us because we are all here on a common public purpose.” These statements are in conflict with subsequent official (and unofficial) portrayals of the interviews, which connect British trade interest in India with the ICC’s appointment. Rather than suggesting the commission’s duplicity, such contradictions must be understood as endemic to the form of the bipartisan inquiry committee and systemic to this conduit of late-colonial state power in India.

The committee nominated by the Government of India’s Home Department on 6 October 1927 was bipartisan in that it was divided equally between British and Indian members. The committee chairmanship was bestowed to Rangachariair, an advocate at the Madras High Court. The other Indians were K. C. Neogy, who went on to chair India’s first finance commission in 1951, and Sir Ebrahim Haroon Jaffer, a prominent Pune businessman and father of parliamentarian Ahmed Jaffer, who would later become Mohammed Ali Jinnah’s close associate and an important member of the Muslim League. As members of British India’s legislative-judicial system, Col. J. D. Crawford, A. M. Green, and J. Coatman were the Englishmen nominated to the committee. The British members, particularly Green and Crawford, raised questions about granting preference to British films more frequently than other members. In contrast, the chairman often sided with witnesses when
they proved resistant to answering such questions. Notwithstanding these
differences between the ICC members, neither they nor their witnesses fell
neatly in line with nationalist allegiances during the interview process. And
so it was that Crawford led queries about encouraging films that met “the
needs of India”; some Indian film importers supported American films rather
than the Indian film industry; and British members of Bombay’s Film Censor
Board worried that Britain’s concern over Indian censorship was a cover for
British trade interests in India. ICC members—both Indian and British—at-
ttempted to be impersonal and neutral as they sought “enlightenment” about
Indian cinema, to quote Rangachariar, trusting the state machinery of ration-
 al dialogue within the committee’s defined sphere of public interaction.
The ICC’s contradictions, failures, and successes were part of this liberal-
imperial apparatus.

Significant aspects of this interview apparatus were its composition and
its procedure. The ICC had both written and oral questions. While its writ-
ten questions were fixed, the oral format allowed for open-ended discussion,
which enabled witnesses to alter, circumvent, and subvert interrogations. To
draw from the Bombay and Karachi data alone, the committee interviewed
a total of sixty-four men (filmmakers, journalists, editors, educationalists)
and nine women. Of the women, one was the popular Anglo-Indian actress
Ruby Myers, whose screen name was Sulochana. The other women included
(Indian) principals of girls schools, a (British) president of the YMCA, and a
(British) representative of the Bombay Vigilance Society. In addition to those
on the committee, then, witnesses were primarily men, those identified as
respectable community members or those who could function as authorita-
tive experts and specialists. Mass Indian film viewers, the largest growing
constituency of silent films in India, were excluded.

One of the important findings of the ICC was that though Indian films
were low in supply, they were high in domestic demand. In a written state-
ment to the ICC, Rao Sahib Chunilal Munim, a representative of the Bom-
bay Cinema and Theater Trade Association (BCTTA) and an agent of Univer-
sal Picture Corporation, USA, claimed that one-third of the film audiences
in India were educated and two-thirds were uneducated, and that the at-
tendance of the “illiterate class” viewing Indian films was increasing. Based
on box-office receipts of theaters screening Indian versus imported films,
J. Stenson, supervisor for the Bombay Entertainment Duty Act, showed that
Indian films were more profitable, though fewer in number, than imported
films. For instance, from 1 January to 30 June 1927, the difference in favor of Indian films was Rs. 41,519.29

The ICC’s parameters point to the committee’s intermediary position between the state and the film-viewing populace. The ICC’s exclusive membership and careful selection of witnesses represented, in microcosm, the state’s reproduction of its realm of power. The ICC was composed of public figures and private individuals who were to transmit the interests of a new industry to the state while also transforming the state’s political authority into rational dialogue. The Government of India was entrusting experts to conduct a detailed study through individual interviews and to formulate an advisory report. The state was, as it were, expressing a desire to evaluate and manage cinema’s unruly progress in a colonial space. If the ICC was an extension of the state’s efforts to organize a new industry, it was also correspondingly a means through which the industry defined and asserted its will on the government. The colonial state permitted the mechanics of liberalism to critique
state-power through its choice of a bipartisan body commissioned with a broad directive to conduct open interviews.

Liberalism here is deployed less as a political doctrine than as an “ethos of recurrent critique” of state rationality, wherein the state ensures the possibility of a public discussion and reflection on state machinery while also defining the parameters of such a critique. In a form of governance that sets limits on its own authority, institutions of the public sphere guarantee a measure of autonomy and self-determination by allowing individual and entrepreneurial liberties, freedom of expression, and democratic representation while also expecting citizens to internalize the mandate of the state. As members of a new bourgeoisie, Indian representatives (and, to an extent, the witnesses) of the ICC functioned as free individuals. Consequently, the committee’s membership, which included private Indian entrepreneurs like Jaffer, dismantled the colonial state’s institutional exclusions by mimicking a liberal state’s extended public sphere. But their participation permitted the committee to only partially approximate the operation of public bodies under liberalism. Under colonialism, as was to become obvious when the ICC submitted their report to the state, the committee’s authority extended only insofar as it could confirm the state’s preexisting intentions for the Indian film industry. The ICC’s proceedings reveal the committee’s mediate position in relation to the state when it simultaneously extended and contradicted the state apparatus.

**PROCEDURE AND FINDINGS** * The committee’s interviews yielded copious material, as it collated in the four volumes of Indian Cinematograph Committee 1927-1928: Evidence information from oral and written evidence given by witnesses involved in different aspects of India’s silent-film production in Bombay and Karachi (volume 1; hereafter, ICC Evidence 1); Lahore, Peshawar, Lucknow, and Calcutta (volume 2); Madras, Rangoon, Mandalay, Jamshedpur, Nagpur, Delhi, and Calcutta (volume 3). The committee questionnaire contained forty-five queries, each with several subquestions. Questions were clustered under two categories: “Part 1: Film Industry in India,” which covered questions about the profile of Indian audiences, their preference in films, schemes for taxation, and state involvement; and “Part 2: Social Aspects and Control,” which dealt with the structure and status of censorship of “sex” and “crime” films in India, and the misrepresentation of India as well as the West in films seen by Indians. Part 1 included a subsection, “Films
22. Should India participate in the policy outlined in the resolution of the Imperial Conference to give some measure of encouragement to British Empire films, and if so would such participation (a) assist the development of her own film industry, (b) assist in making herself better known and understood throughout the Empire and the world, and (c) improve the standard of Western films shown in India. Have you any suggestions as to the methods of putting such a policy into practice and the limitation if any?

23. (a) To what extent can cinema pictures be used for making known the conditions, resources and habits of the peoples, and the activities of the various Governments, of the British Commonwealth of Nations to each other? (b) What measures do you suggest for getting the various Governments to co-operate to this end?

Note that the questions were quite open-ended: the ICC did not assume that the industry’s interests were consonant with the state’s directive to explore imperial cooperation, but it sought spaces of consonance. As only two of forty-five questions addressed British Empire films and because the ICC in general de-emphasized the question of imperial preference, critical readings of the interviews focus primarily on the committee’s interest in the influence of Hollywood films in India and in Indian censorship.

B. D. Garga states, “The heart of the matter was the increasing popularity of the American film in British India. Church, State and prudery combined in an effort to check this influence in ‘various parts of the Empire’ . . . and if it backfired it was entirely due to Dewan Bahadur T. Rangachariar, a brilliant South Indian lawyer, chosen to head the Indian Cinematograph Committee in 1927.”

Someswar Bhowmik ascribes less intentionality to the chairperson’s interventions (although admitting that they were undoubtedly strategic) and points out that it was “no mere coincidence” that the 1926 Imperial Conference, “advocating Imperial Preference for Empire Films (only a euphemism for British films) within the British Empire,” closely followed the British Films Quota Bill of 1927. Bhowmik reiterates, however, that empire films were “subsidiary” to the committee’s interest in the status of Indian film censorship. Eric Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy suggest in their classic study of Indian cinema, which still offers the best account of the ICC to
date, that the committee “was entirely in the spirit of the times,” because it was asked to report on the potential of “Empire films” in India. “The phrase ‘Empire films’ was elusive, but the committee was urged to consider it as including Indian as well as British films. There was a spirit of partnership about this.”

Negotiations regarding the concept of “Empire film” in British and Indian documents suggest that the question of empire quota was progressively muffled in the ICC interviews because of a shift in the political stakes of the issue. Adroitness about the question of empire preference on both sides of this encounter created a context within which protectionist schemes could be discussed only in wary, submerged, and finally negative terms. The interviews unfold the legitimization of certain concerns and the delegitimation of others, as witnesses presented flaws in the premise of empire film reciprocity to underscore Britain’s limited understanding of Indian cultural tastes and conditions in different ways.

To begin with, ICC witnesses asked for clarifications. Proposals based on arguments of cultural reciprocity, cooperation, and moral uplift would require a definite legislation, and the details of such a legislation had not been forthcoming from Britain. So witnesses asked how an empire quota would be apportioned. How many Indian films, as opposed to African, Australian, Canadian, or British films, would be permitted into India as part of the scheme? The Bombay film-exhibitor Rustom C. N. Barucha favored reciprocal arrangements within the empire, but only with “a definite and unequivocal piece of legislation”: “I am not accepting anybody’s assurance. So that if there is a general agreement between the various parts of the Empire, and if we take Australian films, say 1 per cent, Australia should agree to take 1 per cent of Indian.” When Universal’s representative in India, Rao Sahib Chunilal Munim, was asked for his opinion, he indicated that an empire quota would become grounds for the exclusive promotion of British films in India, without giving Indian films any distinct assistance in other empire markets. He was firmly “opposed to any question of Empire protection. I want no protection for British films as such.”

Q: But supposing you want to get your Indian films a market abroad, how do you propose to do it?
A: How I want to adjust the position of India in the quota system?
Q: Supposing the rest of the Empire takes up the British Empire quota system, under that India has a right to take up the whole of it if the
films merit it. You are definitely out to exclude British Empire pictures in India?

A: Yes, because I am apprehensive about the extent that Indian pictures will again be at a disadvantage.

Q: Therefore, if there is any British Empire system which is introduced in India, the whole of it should be allotted to the Indian producer?

A: Yes.

Q: There was one exhibitor who was rather frightened by this quota system, being concerned mainly with the exhibition of foreign films [in India]. Would it help you if you allotted or retained one theatre for the exhibition of foreign films only?

A: Well, in that case—that is the crucial part of your question, though it comes last. . . . [S]upposing you are going to attach some value to our friend’s argument here that there will be some theaters in India, whether in Bombay or other parts of India, for whom it will not be a paying policy to have anything to do with Indian pictures . . . if they are going to be free from showing Indian pictures, they must not be tied-down to British pictures.”

As an agent of Universal, Munim had a vested interest in the promotion of U.S. films in India. But others less affected by the source of foreign films also resisted the restriction of imports to empire films. A. Soares, principal of Antonio De Souza High School, argued that quota protections were not merit-based and would curtail the import of quality films. An “American film would be penalised, not because it is a bad film, but because it is American. A premium would be set on an Empire film, not because it is good, but because it is Imperial. And what would happen if, because of tariff manipulations, worthless Empire films were dumped upon India?” Barucha (whose answers always make good copy) worded his objection more strongly: “It is just possible that we might lose some of the magnificent American pictures, and then all that we will have will be the British-made pictures for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Till we are able to stand on our own legs, whether Empire, American, British or otherwise, I want to select my pictures for my own audience on merits.”

Like British exhibitors, Barucha makes an argument here for free-market competition, although the rhetoric of nationalism in the Indian context, as opposed to interwar Britain, was clearly aligned with entrepreneurial independence. This did not necessarily translate into cultivating nationalist
Indian producers and audiences, so it was distinct from the Gandhian Swadeshi movement, which emphasized the use of indigenous products to unseat the economic basis of British imperial policies. Arguments for the exhibitor’s right of choice frequently highlighted the heterogeneous nature of colonial India’s film industry; witnesses had different visions of the industry’s future based on competing notions of the key audience demographic for Indian films. For importers like Munim and Ardeshir Bilimoria who worked in the silent-film era, catering to the Anglophone Indian viewer with Hollywood films appeared more financially viable than producing Indian films for mass Indian audiences.

Members of the BCTTA noted that India’s educated and illiterate classes had varying preferences in film genres: “To the educated classes: - Indian Life, Topical Indian News, National Literature, History and Social Dramas”; “To the illiterate population: - Topical Indian News, History and Mythology, Folklore Romances.” 41 Indian historicals and mythologicals drew the greatest crowds, and the films mentioned repeatedly include Lanka Dahan (Phalke, 1917), The Light of Asia (Osten, 1925), Raja Harishchandra (Phalke, 1913, remade in 1917), Sacrifice (Gandhi, 1927), Savitri (Mannini, 1923; an Italian film claimed as a co-production by India’s Madan Theaters), Sinhagad (Painter, 1923), and Sri Krishna Janma (Phalke, 1918). 42 Attendance and film screenings varied based on the urban location of theaters. In Bombay educated Indians, Anglo-Indians, and Europeans frequented cinema halls in the Fort area that screened Western films. Indians of all classes and religions visited theaters in Girgaum, which was dominated by Indian films, and largely Hindu audiences fraternized theaters around Parel-Dadar, which also favored Indian films. 43 Exhibitors argued that as educated Indians were close to Europeans in judgment and sensibilities, such audiences were not in danger of misinterpreting American films as representative reflections of all white people. Following a British Empire film scheme, if theaters like the Excelsior or Empire departed from exhibiting American films in favor of screening Indian pictures, they would incur heavy losses, noted N. N. Engineer, a representative of the BCTTA. 44 Munim pointed out that “the Empress tried a Naladamayanti film [based on a story from the Indian epic, Mahabharatha], and they got about [Rs]12,000. Then they tried to show the same film in the Excelsior, and they hardly got about Rs. 50 a day.” 45 Conversely, foreign films did not draw as many uneducated or the non–English-speaking Indian spectators, and enforcing an empire film quota on theaters in Girgaum or Parel-Dadar would
inflict heavy losses on those exhibitors. In sum, Indian exhibitors argued, the Indian “masses” supposedly in danger of being corrupted by American films were not very interested in them.

In a pattern of argument discernible in various interviews, witnesses noted that for uneducated Indian audiences, foreign films were indistinguishable from each other and less appealing, on the whole, than Indian films. Arguments about the ill-effects of American films on Indians assumed passive audiences, which witnesses challenged with portrayals of an active, discriminatory audience base, thus systematically reorienting concerns about morality toward the predilection of India viewers. Linking culture back to trade, witnesses also pointed out that protection for empire films in colonial India would not so much facilitate the flow of culture and cooperation within the empire as reinforce existing inequalities in film finance. There were three bases for this argument. First, an empire quota could not alleviate prevailing tariff disparities between imported film prints and raw film stock in India. Second, Indian films could not hope to get reciprocal treatment in the foreign markets because Indian filmmakers had restricted access to finances, technology, and training. And third, the Indian film industry had a promising domestic market and a unique familiarity with it, so that an empire market at this stage was neither practical nor desirable.

Several witnesses argued that if state intervention was to be encouraged at all, it should be to equalize tariff disparities between the import of exposed films (film prints ready for exhibition) as opposed to raw film stock (unexposed film that Indian filmmakers needed for their productions). Among others, I. K. Yajnik, editor of Hindustan and Praja Mitra (later a film scenarist and producer), noted that an Indian film was about ten times more expensive than an imported film because of unfair custom tariffs. Ardeshir Irani, proprietor of Imperial Film Corporation, who in 1931 produced Alam Ara, India’s first talkie, explained that exposed positives cost two annas per foot, which greatly undercut the cost of producing an Indian film after purchasing raw film stock at one anna per foot. While foreign film prints were numerous and cheap, Indian films were more popular (Lanka Dahan and Krishna Janma had yielded several times their cost of production as profit to the producers) but scarce and expensive.

Given the expense of raw film stock and Indian film production, Indian films were not sold but circulated at a percentage of box-office returns in urban areas and at a fixed hire in moffusils (small towns and villages). This
resulted in an undeveloped Indian–film-distribution sector because the producer dealt directly with exhibitors, and created a lag time before producers began work on their next film, given their increased dependence on box-office receipts. As Indian films couldn’t compete with foreign films on an equal footing in the domestic market because of restrictive tariff rules and a lack of state support, state-sponsored discussions of Indian films for an empire market were meaningless.

Moreover, Indian film producers had little evidence that there was any demand for Indian films in England or the British Empire, though some filmmakers disagreed with this. In this regard the late 1920s and the late 1990s present an interesting counterpoint. In distinction to the period from 1947 to 1998, during which Indian cinema turned toward its domestic market, Indian producers considered the global market an attractive alternative in the colonial and transnational eras, given the government’s lack of restrictions on the entry of foreign finance. In the 1920s, when U.S., British, and German producers showed an interest in India’s domestic film market, Britain’s empire quota proposals involved convincing Indian filmmakers of the possibility of an empire audience for Indian films. Like filmmakers today, colonial Indian filmmakers who wished to address a wider audience had to make high investments to plan for an international release, thus risking the possibility of having to alter content to appease a new market, possibly souring domestic audiences, and sustaining higher losses in case of a flop. The producer Himansu Rai, among the few who initiated international collaborations in the 1920s, commented on what it would take for Indian cinema to secure an international market: “There is no way unless one is prepared to risk very big sums of money and produce a picture as good as possible and then go to England with some ten thousand pounds, take a cinema house and begin showing there, even at a loss, and try to make the widest possible publicity.”

Few colonial Indian filmmakers were able or willing to do this. Speaking of the screenings of Sri Krishna Janma and Shahjahan in London, Ardeshir Irani commented, “But they were not at all liked by the people there.” Madan Theaters sent Nur Jahan and Druvacharita to England, but apparently they were returned. As Barucha confirmed, the provision for British Empire films in the British bill would be a “dead letter” as far as India was concerned, because of the cultural specificity of Indian films. Rustomji Dorabji, proprietor of Wellington, West End, and Venus Cinemas, noted that no other country could make films for the Indian market because they lacked the knowledge of the
Indian star system and of local themes. Similarly, according to S. K. Naique, honorary general secretary of the Aryan Excelsior League, an organization that studied the moral and educational influences of the cinematograph industry, Indian films were popular in India despite the fact that they frequently fell short of the production standards of Western films because they were “better followed, understood and relished.” Narrating his memories several decades later, the film producer and director J. B. H. Wadia confirms this. He recalls seeing “Dadasaheb Phalke’s memorable Lanka Dahan tagged to an American feature film in the old West End Cinema. . . . As a Westernised Parsee youngster I had a hearty laugh at the sight of a muscular Sita played by a male artiste” in Phalke’s film, though “in the ensuing years I clean forgot the American film but have always retained the memory of Lanka Dahan.”

Witnesses like N. D. Gandhi and P. S. Talayarkhan of Orient Pictures, who together produced the successful film Sacrifice, which was based on a Tagore play, felt that India as yet lacked the facilities and finances to compete internationally. Others, like Soares, suggested that it was not so much a matter of technical facilities as cultural sympathies. Indian films would be “distinctive and unique,” and Indian cinema’s popularity could only be premised on the acceptance of those qualities. So most witnesses believed that significant preparatory work was required before empire markets could become hospitable to Indian films. This implied that a British Empire film scheme’s foundational assumption of cultural reciprocity—based on the argument that India should open itself up to empire films as a way of getting Britain and its dominions to return the gesture—was nonsensical, given the lack of preexisting interest and understanding of India in other parts of the empire.

With such arguments, witnesses disarticulated the generic “Empire film” of the British film policy from the specific appeals of “Indian films.” Whenever ICC questions linked the protection for empire films to increased cultural traffic within the empire, interviewees created a dialogic context within which such suggestions seemed tantamount to the sole promotion of British films in India. As R. Venkataram, assistant editor for the Indian National Herald, asserted, “Nationalist Indian opinion will not tolerate that kind of thing.” The primary defense of the Indian film industry against state incursion, however, was not based on patriotic grounds but on pragmatic and commercial ones. Audiences weren’t created by dictating exhibitor quotas, argued Hague, Pathé’s proprietor in India. It was more a question of a film’s theme and its
appeal to audiences. In Munim’s words, “There is no use in compulsion in these matters.”

**ICC’S FINAL REPORT** In chapter 6 of the final version of the *Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee 1927–1928* (hereafter, *ICC Report*), which was based on these interviews, the committee made a unanimous and persuasive case to oppose artificial aid for British films in India, because they stood a good chance of finding an audience, “provided that they are of fair or average quality and that the prices are reasonable.” (The ICC proposed that films of educational value, rather than entertainment films, could be exchanged between various territories of the empire by mutual agreement). A majority of the cinema-going public in India were Indian Hindus, Muslims, or Christians, unlike the settler colonies of Australia or Canada where a majority of the cinema viewers were of the same race as the British and shared similar social customs and habits. For Indian viewers, British and American films were equally foreign, and “if too much exhibition of American films in the country is a danger to the national interest, too much exhibition of other Western films is as much a danger.” Here the ICC was repeating a common perception among all witnesses: as H. Hamill, a member of the Bombay Board of Film Censors, commented, when it came to immoral films, the “danger will remain no matter who produces the film. Whether it is a British or an American company that produces, they will have to cater for people who want sensation.”

With India’s economic conditions, the ICC argued, it “can afford but a poor market or outlet for Empire films,” so “India stands to gain indeed if really her films can find an outlet to an equal extent to which Empire films can find an outlet here,” but given existing circumstances, that was not likely. Moreover, out of the 108 feature films produced in England between 1925 and 1927, India had imported as many as seventy-four films. Notwithstanding this fact, Hollywood films constituted 80 percent of India’s film imports, while British films accounted for a meager 10 percent. As long as India was dependent on the United States for a majority of its imports while constituting no more than half of one percent of America’s cinema revenue, Indian filmmakers could “ill afford to estrange” America by giving preference to empire films.

Beyond being about imperial trade, the ICC Report pointed out that “imperial preference is a large and complicated question.”
The question of Imperial Preference is so bound up with so many other political issues of a very vital and substantial character that on a small issue relating to the cinema industry, even if it were an aid to the Indian industry, a view which we do not hold, the question cannot be examined satisfactorily. The question is in fact bound up with issues political, racial, economic and the like. . . . It is the introduction of this question in the terms of reference to this Committee which has, in a great measure, induced the suspicions of the people of this country as to the motives of the Government in appointing it.69

In the final analysis witnesses not only rejected the impact of foreign films on Indian morality as adequate grounds for an empire quota but also proposed a special quota for Indian films in India. This altered the terms of discussion so radically that the committee’s final report, reflecting its gathered evidence, recommended that Indian producers receive public financing for their films and that protectionist policies such as reservation of screens, theaters, or seats be extended exclusively to films produced locally.70 “Even had we decided on an Empire quota for India, it is obvious that the whole of it would have been allotted to Indian films.”71

This last suggestion was not unanimous. The final version of the ICC Report contains a minute of dissent, filed by the British members of the committee against a quota for Indian films and against financial support for Indian producers. The ICC’s minute of dissent contradicts initial statements of the commission’s goals, which in no uncertain terms include a directive to determine what kinds of “suitable Government action whether legislative or administrative may be an effective incentive and encouragement to private film production.”72 Confronted with demands for supporting Indian films, we find the British dissenters saying “God helps those that help themselves.”73 They argued against state support of “a luxury industry which without assistance has expanded rapidly and is earning good profits,”74 remarking, “we object most strongly on principle to the suggestion that Government should give public money on easy terms or on any terms to an industry which by no stretch of the imagination can be regarded as a key industry.”75

The ICC Report was celebrated as enlightened and forward-looking in Britain, but it contained too many undesirable recommendations to be put into practice.76 Though the promotion of empire films within India was discussed in no more than one chapter of the report, the issue was given prominence in British reportage. The Times, an English newspaper, began an article on the
report, “The British film maker will find little comfort in the recommendations of the Committee which has just reported on the cinema industry in India. Preferential treatment for British films is rejected. . . . [T]he fears of those who complain that Western films tend to bring Western civilization into contempt, and to demoralize the Indian public, are sharply dismissed as unfounded.” Perhaps this article, which finds the ICC suggestion to offer a quota for Indian films “rather startling,” best expresses where British interests lay.

Studying the coeval origins of liberalism and imperialism in British political thought, Uday Mehta notes that “concealed behind the endorsement of [liberalism’s] universal capacities are the specific cultural and psychological conditions that are woven in as preconditions for the actualization of these capacities.” With British Empire film schemes, the British Films Quota Bill utilized liberalism’s language of political inclusion to get leverage within colonial film markets, leaving itself exposed to its own contradictions as the exclusionary basis of empire quota arguments came to the fore. With the ICC interviews, members of the Indian film industry dismantled quota proposals on the grounds of persistent structural inequities that eroded the premise of bilateral dialogue.

**Contingent Colonial Knowledge**

On 23 March 1928, Rai Bahadur J. P. Ganguly, undersecretary for the Government of India, wrote a letter to the secretary of the Government of Bombay demanding, in all seriousness, to know which Indian film production firms were British. Apparently, Britain’s BT (Board of Trade) was anxious to receive information on Indian production companies, anticipating that Indian filmmakers would apply to register their films as British and claim quota eligibility under Britain’s 1927 Film Quota Act. As the BT was responsible for registering all films, they required an immediate and complete report of Indian production firms. They requested a “body of information” to “enable the Board to come to a decision as to the registration of films submitted by firms in your territory, more particularly in cases where it is established that local [Indian] firms are truly British in character and sentiment.”

Quite apart from the notion that Indian firms could reflect a “truly British” character, India’s undersecretary and the British BT were making some questionable assumptions. They assumed that Indian production firms were traceable at a time when in fact the industry was disorganized, with some
producers disappearing after a few films. They also assumed that the information to make “a determination in each case as to whether a film is British in the sense of the Bill” was quantifiable and that someone in India (in addition to the BT in Britain) had the wherewithal to preside over such decisions.

In India the task of gathering such information went to police commissioners (who were typically British and served as ex officio heads of regional film-censor boards), with the provision that “the owners of film companies were not told why the inquiries are being made.” The police knew that secrecy would reduce both the amount of voluntary information given as well as the verifiability of information sources; acting on the advice of the police, the Government of India retracted their confidentiality clause and informed Indian production firms of the inquiry’s purpose.

The police identified twenty-four firms producing silent films in India, including fourteen in Bombay and surrounding areas, four in Bengal, two temporary production houses in Madras, two in Punjab, and two in Delhi. The better-known firms were in or around Bombay, including Imperial Film in Grant Road, Kohinoor Film in Dadar, Maharashtra Film in Kolhapur, and Sharda Film in Tardeo. The police sent them questionnaires asking for such information as the firm’s name, registration, owner’s nationality, capital, types of films produced, and production capacity. The Indian response to the questionnaires was one of suspicion, skepticism, and apathy. Only six of twenty-four responded, with others claiming reluctance “as they do not expect to gain anything, it being considered by them most improbable that their films will ever be exhibited in England.” Looking into this film industry, which was run on a more-or-less artisanal model, the police commissioners also found that “companies in the [Bombay] Presidency are reluctant to give any information . . . as they are afraid it would leak out to their rival companies.” Without being an act of direct rebellion against the state, such obfuscation nevertheless hindered the state’s efforts at systematizing information about the Indian film industry. Unlike the ICC investigators who fielded witnesses that actively deflected questions about an empire quota, police investigators encountered instead the absence of a public domain of citable information that could be collated and quantified. The fledgling Indian film industry blindsided the state because it was organized by another order of information, one based on a variable system of trust.

Rumors about the British film industry were among such informal intrusions into state power. Well before the ICC came to India, Indian rumor mills were abuzz with news of British schemes to dominate the Indian film mar-
ket. There were two distinct waves of rumors—in 1925–1926 and in 1937–1938—preceeding and following the passage of the British Film Quota Acts of 1927 and 1938. In 1926 news reached India that a million-pound British syndicate was under construction to promote British films in the empire. The Crown government had allegedly proposed the scheme to the Government of India and had taken contributions from the maharajas of Kashmir, Alwar, Patiala, Bikaner, Jaipur, and the Agha Khan. The princely states may have been believed to have contributed to a British film syndicate, as most Indian princes were Crown loyalists and British protectorates. The British India government permitted them to maintain sovereignty over their kingdom, so their culpability in a purported British scheme to dominate Indian cinema must have seemed plausible. The syndicate was reputed to have undertaken the construction of Indian cinema halls in order to screen exclusively British pictures.

A year later, in January 1927, The Bioscope, a U.S. film journal, reported that Alexander Macdonald (“explorer, traveler, author”) had registered a company called Seven Seas Production with capital of £10,000 to produce empire-themed films. In February of the same year The Bioscope ran an introductory announcement of a company called British International Film Distributors, which was to offer British films for distribution all over the empire, with the exception of Canada. The Bioscope also ran an article titled “Indian Circuit for British Group?” which contained an interview with J. J. Madan, managing director of Madan Theaters, the largest importer of foreign films in India. Madan was quoted as saying, “Some important British Financial Groups are anxious to obtain control of our chain of ninety-one cinemas in India, Burma and Ceylon.” None of this was substantiated, but the reports confirmed prevailing anxieties in the Indian film industry and vitiated the ICC initiative, as was clear in an exchange between the film exhibitor Barucha and A. M. Green, a British member of the ICC, wherein Barucha responded, in a convoluted manner, to a question about his opinion on a British Empire quota in India.

**Mr. Barucha:** On that point I would invite the attention of the Committee to the preliminary remarks which the Chairman of this Committee made on the opening day. In which he tried to make it clear that the present inquiry was an inquiry on its own merits and not a propaganda business. There are certain circumstances which as far as the [Indian film] trade is concerned it is very difficult to get away from. I am point-
ing out now a small circumstance which occurred some time in June or July last when we had in India a visit from a gentleman called Captain Malins who ostensibly was making a tour on a motor-bike throughout the world. The significance of his visit comes in this way, that he seemed to go a little out of his way when he got a resolution passed before the Calcutta Parliament to the effect that the American films were subversive of all morals and religion . . .

Q [A. M. GREEN]: He is in no way connected with this Committee?

A: After that came the announcement that a British Syndicate has been formed in England with a million pounds capital and an empire wide scheme. There was also at the same time the announcement that Sir Chimanlal Setalvad was placed at the head of the Syndicate’s ramification in India. So all these three things put together there is some justification for the public to suppose that there is some scheme which will be put forward at the end of this enquiry with which the country, as a whole, may not be in agreement.

Q: I hope I shall be allowed to put my question to the witness, and after that he may be allowed to make his protest, if necessary. I can assure him that I had no intention or anything of that kind in my mind. I have not even yet developed my question. I do not see the relevancy of his remarks at all.

A: The relevancy of my remarks comes in this way . . .

CHAIRMAN: I cannot say that his remarks are altogether irrelevant.

A: Thank you, Sir. There is the public feeling and a large section of the trade is also saying the same thing; so that before the trade is committed to any attitude on the question of quota, it is only fair to the trade that they get a clear idea of what exactly is meant by the whole thing.83

In this interaction, the interviewer is put in the distinctly uncomfortable position of having to account for the Indian film industry’s skepticism of the ICC’s motivations, based on three preceding and seemingly unrelated events. In the course of his interview, Barucha returned repeatedly to these incidents, insisting that they were “the three material circumstances that cut at the root of the good will which an Inquiry Committee like this should carry in its wake.”84 Like other witnesses, Barucha circumvented the immediate questions to respond to the subtext.

Contrary to Barucha’s fears, however, British efforts to promote commercial British films in the empire were unsuccessful, or dispersed and unstable
at best. Ardeshir Bilimoria, director of Madan Theaters in Bombay, which
had a veritable monopoly on the exhibition of imported films, felt that edu-
cated Indians would exhibit an affinity for British rather than American films,
because when his theater screened British films like “‘The House of Tem-
perley,’ ‘The Prisoner of Zenda,’ ‘Rupert of Hentzau’ and ‘England’s Men-
ace’... [t]hey were a great draw. But unfortunately this particular company
[unnamed by the witness] ceased to exist as soon as the war came.”

There is no evidence of a large-scale, organized distribution network for commercial
British films in the empire, and no British distributors were posted in India in
the 1920s. Regimental and club cinemas of the 1920s, which screened films
exclusively for British military troops and club members, imported films di-
rectly from America, Germany, and England. B. D. Gupta, managing propri-
etor of some of these exclusive theaters, noted that in 1926 he had imported
only one film from Britain because “British pictures which are really good are
produced at an enormous cost and I cannot afford to purchase them at all.”

American comedies and adventures starring Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd,
Jackie Coogan, and Douglas Fairbanks were both affordable and popular with
expatriate British and local audiences.

After the arrival of talkies, local branches of Indian and U.S. distribu-
tion companies distributed British films. For instance, British and Dominion
films were distributed by Madan Theatres, Gainsborough Pictures films were
distributed by India’s British Empire Film Corporation, and Korda’s Lon-
don Films productions were frequently distributed by local representatives
of United Artists, USA, though Korda also used Indian companies such as
New India Distributors. Several British films were also distributed in India
through Gaumont and Pathé-India. While the British State did not assist in
the distribution of commercial films (distinct from shorts, documentaries,
nonfeatures, and propaganda films), there is evidence that a few individuals
and organizations attempted to systematize empire-wide schemes.

In 1926, prior to the Quota Act, the FBI sent an “offer” of “Co-operative
Marketing” to the BOT, arguing that “the great American companies have
elaborate distribution organizations in the Dominions,” while British com-
panies suffered through a lack of coordinated distribution. The FBI offer
proposed an organization to provide dominion exhibitors with British films
and projected the company’s set-up costs at £200,000. In 1930 the secre-
tary of state for the colonies appointed a Colonial Films Committee to ex-
amine, among other things, “the supply and exhibition of British films” in
the empire. With the FBI’s help, the committee set up a distribution company called the British United Film Producers (BUFDP) with a provision of up to £1,000 from colonial governments, to distribute British films to the colonies “at reasonable trade rates.” None of these organizations added up to a million-pound syndicate, and there is little information about which films, if any, were distributed by these firms. But such proposals, frequently no more than blueprints, do suggest that rumors of British interest in an empire market were not baseless. In Britain explorations into the possibility of organized distribution in the empire accompanied discussions of protective quota legislation.

Rumors have always held a special discursive status in colonial society, and in this case, anticolonial hearsay was a tangible and constant form of resistance to actual and potential colonial film schemes. Ranajit Guha points out in his foundational essay on Indian peasant insurgency that there is a “correspondence between the public discourse of rumor and . . . popular act[s] of insurrection.” Indian rumors about a British syndicate wishing to monopolize India’s film industry were of a very different order than those that pushed a political rebellion to its crisis, but the similarity lies in their rhetoric of opposition against a foreign state, which had the power to legislate. Identifying rumor as a unique mode of utterance in the colonial context, Guha notes that rumors distinguish themselves from the “ideal site of official truth,” by appearing to participate in a collectivist discourse. (Additionally, rumors can be imbued with sanction when put in print, as with rumors of a British film scheme for India which, when repudiated by the ICC, became part of the construction of an official truth). Rumors are ambiguous, anonymous, and difficult to authenticate. They are transitive, reappearing in different versions at different times, bringing diffuse fears about socioeconomic inequities into the realm of discussion.

These aspects of rumors about Britain’s empire scheme appear in the wake of BT’s 1936 Moyne Committee Report, an assessment of the 1927 Quota Act that renewed interest in empire film markets in Britain. In 1937 the British paper The Morning Post reported that the British State was offering a subsidy to its film industry to set up “film studios and cinema theaters in India with a view to competing with Germany and America.” The Indian newspaper The Times of India printed these reports under the alarmist title “Threat to Indian Film Industry” (5 August 1937) and The Statesman announced a “British Proposal: Preparing Subsidy Scheme” (27 August 1937). Quoting these articles, the
newly formed Indian Motion Picture Producers Association (IMPPA) wrote
to the British BT (in 1937 and 1938) demanding verification or denial of the
reports. The rumors gave popular resentment a point to rally around, giving
voice to the Indian film industry’s anxieties about imminent state policy.
Members of the Indian Legislative Assembly raised angry questions about the
alleged scheme in Parliament.95

A passionate pursuer of this issue was the nationalist politician S. Satya-
murthi, a member of the Indian Legislative Assembly and later president of
the Motion Picture Congress of India in 1937 and 1939.96 Satyamurthi was
active in India’s Non-Cooperation Movement and frequently spoke out in Par-
liament against film censorship. He supported cinema as an object of study
and as a nation-building force, and exercised great influence on Tamil film
artists like K. B. Sunderambal and M. K. Thyagaraja Bhagavadhar. Accord-
ing to the film historian S. Theodore Baskaran, Bhagavadhar, a leading South
Indian star and singer, gave up imported silks to wear homespun khadi at
Satyamurthi’s request.97 The parliamentarian’s response to the government’s
refusal to address the legitimacy of the empire-scheme rumors was one of
sarcasm.

MR. S. SATYAMURTHI: May I know the reason why the Government of India
do not wish to write to the Secretary of State for India and find out if
there is such a proposal? Can’t they afford one anna?

THE HONOURABLE SIR THOMAS STEWART: In the interest of economy.

MR. K. SANTHANAM: May I know whether the British Government are pro-
tecting the film industry in England by a quota system?

THE HONOURABLE SIR THOMAS STEWART: I submit that [the need for this
question] does not arise.98

The British quota was a sensitive issue and became, in India, a referent
of the state’s benevolence toward Britain’s national film industry, as well as
its active indifference or ill-will toward Indian cinema. The state refused to
remove high tariffs on raw film stock entering the colony, thus artificially
suppressing the growth of indigenous film trade, and supporters of Indian
industry were not averse to highlighting such discrepancies in state policy
during empire-quota discussions. Though the state did not issue a denial at
Satyamurthi’s request, it did leave a paper trail of confidential discussions
about the testy exchange over rumors of empire-subsidy schemes and empire
syndicates.99 Internal letters within Britain’s Public and Judicial Department
at the India Office questioned the appropriateness of Satyamurthi’s question:
could the Government of India be questioned on potentially private syndicates? 100

Officials in Britain admitted knowing of plans for syndicates but asserted that the government had “never been approached.” The truth of this statement is difficult to verify: the FBI certainly approached the state in 1934 and 1938 to initiate imperial preference in films with India, but efforts of private syndicates are harder to trace. 101 R. Peel, secretary of the Public and Judicial Department, India Office, dismissed the rumors as “entirely a figment of the Morning Post’s imagination,” noting that reports of syndicates were received with “great hostility in the Indian press.” 102 Nevertheless, news items of this nature persisted, and in 1938, The Film Daily, a U.S. trade publication, reported that two British producers—Capt. Norman Eric Franklin and Sir William Frederick O’Connor—had acquired £50,000 from a private syndicate in Britain to set up a production unit in India. Captain Franklin is reported to have said, “We expect to arrange for the rest of our financing in Hollywood during the next month.” 103

A significant difference between the first round of rumors in 1927 and their resurgence ten years later was that the Indian film industry had expanded and formalized in the meantime. It acquired stability with the emergence of sound technology and studios. It gained official presence with organizations like the IMPPA, registered under the Company’s Act on 8 October 1938, joining the ranks of organizations like the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), which was formed in 1927 under the leadership of G. D. Birla and Sir Purshottamdas to represent Indian capital against the colonial government. The film industry had also gained access to public opinion through nationalist film journals like Bombay’s Filmindia, the Madras-based Talk-A-Tone, Calcutta’s Varieties Weekly, the Gujarati-language Chitrapat and long-standing Mouj Majah, as well as the self-proclaimed “Biting, Fighting, Attacking Journal” Sound in the 1940s. 104

By the late 1930s, the British State was already severely divided on the issue of intervening in India on behalf of British film trade, aware of the uproar that any structural, policy-based alteration to a colonial industry could produce. In 1937, for instance, Sir Ralph Glyn of the BT attempted to reintroduce a discussion of empire film quotas, writing to Rt. Hon. Oliver Stanley of the Board of Education, “Possibly, whilst the Film Bill is before Parliament and in most people’s minds, you may be able to suggest something that would also have the approval of the India Office.” 105 R. D. Fennelly of the BT pursued the possibility with members of the India Office (particularly R. Peel and A. Dib-
Indian film journals consolidated their position with appeals to nationalism. Courtesy NFAI.

(din), who were restrained and discouraging in their response: “The American film no doubt predominates in India for the same reason as it predominates in this country, because it is in the main better and cheaper than the British film. Any attempt to subsidise the British film industry in India would be most unpopular and would probably do more harm than good. This seems clear from the fuss which arose from a statement made by the Morning Post, entirely on its own initiative, to the effect that H.M.G. [His Majesty’s Government] were proposing to subsidise the setting up of British film studios in India.”

Official consensus in Britain moved toward the notion that FBI’s interest in exploiting an Indian film market was best left to commercial initiatives. Britain’s Department of Overseas Trade concurred that “any film shown [in India] which was known to have been subsidised would cause more political trouble in the country” than provocative British or Hollywood films. Ironi-
cally, though the ICC interviews of 1927 were intended as a possible preamble to a British Empire film scheme in India, they instead marked the beginning of the state’s demurral from involvement in India’s film industry.
Limits of Colonial Knowledge

Several Indians who resisted the state’s interference in Indian cinema nevertheless shared their colonial administrators’ beliefs that film was a nonessential commodity and a symbol of degenerate technological modernity. If legislators like S. Satyamurthi were convinced of cinema’s value, other officials could be heard expressing familiar doubts about the new habit of visiting movie theaters. To quote Gaya Prasad Singh, who represented the seat of “Muzaffarpur cum Champaran; non-Mohammadan,” in the Legislative Assembly on 1 March 1933: “Just to be shut up in a dark room in the evening with all sorts and classes of people and sexes is not a very happy idea for me. (Laughter).” Urban, educated Indians worried about the effect of cinema in “backward” areas, weighing the question in terms of the effects of undeniably good technologies (like the railways) against the influence of dubious ones (like cinema, motorcars, and firearms).

Similarly, the nationalist possibilities of cinema influenced filmmakers in different ways. The director Dadasaheb Phalke claimed, “My films are Swadeshi in the sense that the capital, ownership, employees, and the stories are Swadeshi,” while the producer-actor Himansu Rai spoke of cinema as an “International Art” that could only improve with foreign collaboration. The key question “What is cinema?” was politically charged in a colonial context because it required a simultaneous response to India’s status in relation to modernity and nationalism. Discussing and legislating for the Indian film industry—which was subject to colonial state policies while it drew from, and promoted the values of, India’s emergent civil society—accentuated the complexities of the colony’s new social formations. A motley mix of people joined the Indian film industry from divergent classes, castes, professions, and religions. Additionally, a diversity of political attitudes toward nationalism and a variety of backgrounds forming India’s film industry produced a heterogeneous range of artistic ambitions for cinema. This factor eludes the government files of Britain and India.

Indeed, the archive’s historical realities are delimited in the sense of being produced by official discourse in at least two obvious ways. First, the interviews recreate a contained public sphere of dialogue officially deemed rational and representative, replicating (rather than interrogating) the ideologies and subjectivities of interviewed personnel. Second, urban, rural, and moffusil constituencies of mass Indian cinema-goers are commented on and sta-
tistically calibrated rather than included in their own voices, because they cannot be accommodated among a body of experts. The fractures and fraternities between the imperial state, the ICC, the emerging entrepreneurial class of Indian filmmakers, and the commentators on the industry were revealed in the interviews.

Himansu Rai was someone the ICC interviewers could understand well. They shared his respectable educational and class background. At the time of his interview, Rai was flush with the success of The Light of Asia and had just completed co-producing Shiraz (silent, Osten, 1928) with Berlin’s UFA (which had bought the film’s distribution rights in Europe) and British Instructional (with rights to Britain). Co-productions were not the norm at the time, so ICC members were extremely interested in Rai’s testimony. His films suggested the possibility of an international and perhaps imperial circuit for Indian cinema. Unfortunately, Rai informed the ICC, though the German company Emelka had distributed The Light of Asia in Europe, he had found no interested exhibitors in Britain. This appeared to confirm what Barucha, among other exhibitors and producers, had reported to the ICC: “If the answer really depended on the merits of the Indian picture, I would have said I expect my pictures to be popular in America or in England. But that is not the only factor operating in the world to-day. Racial prejudices have got to be overcome. There are some people who, if they come to India and see an Indian picture, are bound to like it; but as to getting it across to their own country and exhibiting it there, it is infra dig.” Surprisingly, Rai disagreed with this explanation despite his negative experience in Britain. He was convinced that Britain’s indifferent treatment of his film was not because of Indian cinema’s cultural non-exportability but because of his associate Niranjan Pal’s poor business acumen. Taking charge of failing business, Rai used his acquaintance with Sir Atul Chatterjee, the Indian high commissioner in London, to procure a screening of the film at Buckingham Palace to an audience of King George V and Queen Mary. This raised trade interest in the film.

Rai was clearly an enterprising man. Colin Pal, the son of Rai’s long-time collaborator Niranjan Pal, wrote about the time that Rai noticed a shot of a Delhi tram with a “Buy Dunlop Tyres” sign in a modern scene from The Light of Asia, then promptly took the film to Dunlop executives and acquired Rs. 10,000 for retaining the shot, which was just enough money to hire an Indian theater for screening the film. In addition to his initiative, however, Rai’s social connections repeatedly assisted his career. His vision of film as an international art was facilitated by his access to international markets.
Born into a wealthy Bengali family, Rai studied law in London (where in 1924 he met Niranjan Pal, later the scriptwriter for several of his films). According to his own testimony, Rai spent close to fifteen years in Europe and visited studios in the United States, Germany, and Britain. His acquaintance with Indian Trade Commissioner Lindsay gave him access to appropriate distributors in British International for Shiraz. And when he turned his attention to making sound films for the Indian market in 1934 (after Germany shut down under the Nazi government), his studio, Bombay Talkies, had five prominent Indians on its board of governors, each of whom had been granted knighthood by the British Crown.

The ICC was more likely to select witnesses like Rai and speak to them at length, because they represented educated, English-speaking, knowledgeable specialists in the field. As an official body that approached the interviews as a form of administrative modernity, the ICC netted people who approximated to their idea of enlightened, modern individuals. The official interview apparatus built in certain social and political biases. For instance, to acquire a fair spread of the industry the ICC interviewed 239 Indians (157 Hindus, 38 Muslims, 25 Parsis, 16 Burmese, 2 Sikhs, 1 Christian), 114 Europeans, Americans, and Anglo-Indians, with a total of 35 women. The ICC’s attempt to be communally representative replicated the colonial (and later the nation) state’s practice of identity-based divisions, apportioning each group a representative ratio that was presumably in accord with its perceived significance. (Numerical strength was also a factor, in the sense that India’s Hindu majority received greater representation, but that does not explain the nominal presence of women on the committee.) Communal, national, and gender divisions simultaneously politicized those indexes of identity by transforming them into a primary template through which individuals participated in the state system, and attenuated cultural or class-based interconnections between individuals. Ideological differences such as those between Parsi men (like exhibitor Rustomji Dorabji and producer Homi Wadia) or between Hindus (like Rai and the director Baburao Painter), as well as cultural affinities across nationalities (between the Indian Rai and the British A. M. Green) are suppressed by the ICC’s numerically driven communal-national paradigm for selecting a sample of representative witnesses.

Baburao Painter, another popular contemporary filmmaker, came from a very different social background than Rai. Born into a family of painters and craftsmen (hence the moniker), Painter’s life exemplified the coexistence of artisanal and modern modes of production in Indian silent cinema.
Painter drew on personnel and resources established by pre-existing modes of indigenous entertainment and economy while experimenting with cinematic techniques such as the use of filters, fades, indoor lighting techniques, and shade gradations within black-and-white film. Indian aristocrats who commissioned him to paint their portraits funded his initial film work and lent him clothes, horses, and weapons. Making good use of his props, many of Painter’s silent films were in the mythological and historical genre (like Sairandhri, 1920; Sinhasag; Sati Padmni, 1924; and Bhakta Prahlad, 1926). Whereas both Rai’s and Painter’s film studios had a tremendous impact on their own and the next generation of Indian filmmakers (Ashok Kumar, Dilip Kumar, and Kishore Kumar started their careers in Rai’s Bombay Talkies, the latter two after Rai’s unexpected early death; V. Shantaram, Damle, and Fattelal began at Painter’s Maharastra Studios), the two diverged greatly in filmmaking practices.

As Rai told the ICC in 1928, “No production, say, steel or wood, or any other things can be undertaken unless there is a demand. In the same manner no pictures should be attempted in India unless we are assured that we are going to sell those pictures. . . . For this reason it is of the utmost importance that a demand should be created in the International market for the consumption of Indian pictures.” Rai’s efforts to aim for an international audience with a self-consciously elite creative group, led by the German director Franz Osten, produced orientalist depictions of India in a style of filmmaking markedly different from Painter’s. Prints of Painter’s silent films Sairandhri and Savkari Pash (a.k.a. Indian Shylock [1925]) do not survive, but accounts of his use of social commentary, realism, and historical drama intimate his films’ implicitly local audience. Sairandhri, celebrated by the nationalist leader Tilak, was based on the Marathi play Keechakvadh, which was banned by the British for its allegorical protest against Viceroy Curzon. Savkari Pash was a realist drama of the evils of the Indian feudal system. In contrast, Rai’s The Light of Asia, Shiraz, and The Throw of Dice (a.k.a. Prapancha Pash [Osten, 1929]) used spectacle, mystery, and romance to convince its international audience of the films’ Eastern authenticity. Witness the opening titles of Shiraz: “Shiraz was produced entirely in India. No studio construction or artificial light has been used. The actors are all Indians.” With Painter’s films there is more of a sense of a nation addressing itself rather than producing itself (visually, thematically) for a Western audience.

The question is not one of deciding which director’s films best represented the nation as much as understanding how each realized an artistic
vision within the industrial, political, and social constraints of colonial India. In surveying Indian cinema, the ICC was consolidating a selective sample of these visions as representative of the period. From all reports, Rai was devoted to raising the level of respectability of the Indian film world, and with Bombay Talkies he “was determined to recruit men and women from good families, graduation being the minimum qualification.”120 This was also his effort in earlier years, according to his ICC testimony to the chairman.

Q. Are they [Rai’s actresses] fairly respectable people?
A. So far as I know all of them were respectable.

Q. Did you have any difficulty in getting them to join?
A. Very much.

Q. I suppose the actors also were from a respectable class of people.
A. Yes.121

As is well known, early Indian cinema had few female entrants. Traditional Hindu and Muslim families considered the profession disreputable, so early filmmakers followed the theatrical tradition of using men to play female parts. One of the most popular women of theater was a man, Bal Gandharva, whose female lead in Marathi plays like Sharada, Subhadra, and Ekach Pyala set fashion trends for gold-embroidered saris.122 The illusion, however, was difficult to sustain under the cinematic medium’s mimetic impulse. Women from the more progressive Anglo-Indian community entered the profession, rechristened and reinvented to portray icons of Hindu femininity on silent screens. Rai’s heroine for his first feature, The Light of Asia, was played by a fourteen-year-old Anglo-Indian girl, Renee Smith, née Sita Devi (who was also interviewed by the ICC).

In contrast, Painter’s actors and actresses for his first production, Sairandhari, were male wrestlers and female kalavantins, commercial musical artists (who were not included in the interviews). These actors came from professions affiliated with cinema’s lowbrow roots. Kalavantins and courtesans were affected by the reduction of the princely purse under colonialism, as their aristocratic patronage was replaced by the vagaries of a commercial marketplace. Stigmatized as bazaar auraten (women of the marketplace) or as prostitutes of different ranks, modern-day courtesans found respectability in the film industry once the profession acquired social acceptance and glamour in the 1940s. (Courtesans-turned-actresses include Paro Davi and the star Nargis, daughter of Jaddan Bai.)123 According to an account of Sairandhari, Painter’s female lead Gulab Bai and her fellow cast member Anusaya Bai were
imperial governmentality

ostracized from their kalavantin communities “because they had dared to apply make-up and act” for the film, a debasing gesture in 1921 even by the standards of their socially marginalized profession. In the differences between Rai and Painter’s social milieu of actors lies a broad range of conflicts navigated by colonial filmmakers trying to create an ideal cinematic lingua franca for India.

To assure a film’s success, industry personnel had to define a hegemonic central space in literal and artistic terms, and the manner in which directors, actors, or legislators defined this space rehearsed their class and nationalist politics. With regard to space in the literal sense of a theater’s arena, the ICC interviews included film importers who complained about Indian audiences, wishing to keep their viewers segregated by class and race. Rustomji Dorabji, who screened American films in his theaters (Wellington, West End, and Venus), complained to the ICC that when he screened the Phalke film Lanka Dahan, he had to disinfect his theaters to convince his regular audiences of its cleanliness, which confirmed his belief that “the modes of life of different people are different. The type of people who like Indian pictures—their way of living is quite different and generally they are people who chew beetle leaves and they make things very dirty.” Similar reservations attached themselves to India’s linguistic variety. Several Indian film exhibitors told the ICC that cultural tastes and references were provincially specific in India, so a film from Bengal was as alien to a Bombay resident as a British film. Compounding this was the practical problem of providing silent films with intertitles comprehensible to several linguistic constituencies. To some importers, a universal lexicon of film, visual or linguistic, appeared incompatible with India’s multiplicity.

The importer Ardeshir Bilimoria, speaking to ICC member Sir Haroon Jaffer, suggested India’s variety was more conducive to cacophony than to the development of a universally comprehensible cultural and literary script.

Q. Can you suggest any method by which this language difficulty could be overcome?
A. I myself cannot suggest anything unless there will be a universal language for India, and that is English.

CHAIRMAN: Make everyone learn Hindi. Thank you, Mr. Bilimoria.

The Anglophone exhibitor’s and the nationalist chairman’s variable solutions to mainstreaming the industry points to the fundamental issue at hand. Definitions of what constituted a (linguistic, and ostensibly aesthetic) nor-
mative film language differed radically based on individual social and political sympathies as shaped in relation to a colonial society. “It is within the power of our film industry to make Hindustani the ‘lingua franca’ for India and we shall make it so,” proclaimed Chandulal J. Shah in the Indian Motion Picture Congress in 1939, and one can imagine how ominous that may have sounded to politicians, filmmakers, and film audiences under the Madras Presidency, which strongly protested the official imposition of Hindi in southern India in 1937.128 I bracket the complicated question of aesthetics for the last chapter and conclude with two observations about colonial India’s linguistic and social diversities, which posed challenges to the production of such normativity.

After 1947, Hindi-language cinema dominated the Indian market while only the exceptional regional-language filmmaker crossed over to national audiences. Early sound cinema of the 1930s had yet to acquire the entrenched practices of independent India’s film industry, and the market’s hegemonic division (between Bombay’s nationally distributed Hindi films versus its regionally distributed vernacular-language films) was as yet inchoate. The common practice of making early sound films in more than one language prevailed in the 1930s, as filmmakers of several regions attempted to negotiate India’s multiplicity at a linguistic level in efforts to create what the scholar Mukul Kesavan calls a “metropolitan, pan-Indian form” of cinema.129 V. Shantaram pioneered this bilingual trend by producing Ayodhye Cha Raja in Marathi and Ayodhya ka Raja in Hindi in 1932.

In its linguistic and aesthetic experimentation at a time when the potential of a broadly multifaceted, multilingual national industry appeared to be a live possibility, the late-colonial period echoed some more recent trends in Indian cinema. Since the late 1990s, a fragmentation of Indian film audiences under the influx of foreign corporate capital, increasing multiplexes, neoliberal state policies, and competitive cable-television channels has created two equal and opposite pulls on Indian filmmakers who desire a national audience. In addition to the conventional wisdom that films must be star-studded and ideologically safe Hindi-language musical melodramas in order to reassure distributors and earn significant national profits, an increasing number of Indian filmmakers are drawn to producing lower-budget “crossover” films for niche audiences or to producing the same big-budget film in two national languages. As a result, in addition to the expected Hindi film fare with a bankable star cast like Baghban (Chopra, 2003) and Veer-Zaara (Chopra, 2004) are films with new themes and faces, as in Bhatt-family productions like Mur-
der (Hindi, Basu, 2004) and Jism (Hindi, Saxena, 2003), or in English language and bilingual films like Mango Souffle (English, Dattani, 2002), Everybody Says I’m Fine! (English, Rahul Bose, 2001), Ayutha Yeruthu/ Yuva (Tamil/Hindi, Ratnam, 2004), and Mumbai Express with Kamalahasan (Tamil/English, Rao, 2005). This phenomenon is further complicated by the emergence of diaspora and Indian filmmakers producing films for international and South Asian diaspora audiences: like Mira Nair’s and Deepa Mehta’s films; American Chai (Mehta, 2001); American Desi (Pandya, 2001); and Mitr—My Friend, (Revathy, 2001), all primarily in English. The ideological unity of a nation and its affective address in cinema, always a tenuous construction, has proven volatile when under formation and restructuration in both the colonial and the global eras.

The foundational crisis of Indian nationalism stemmed from its efforts to manufacture universals out of diverse linguistic, class, caste, regional, and religious communities that were minoritized and subordinated as a precondition to participating in the national collective. In a society defined by the “problem” of collectivities, Indian directors and producers confronted with a new medium that depended on a mass audience defined the ideal Indian film form and film-viewing experience in variable and contradictory ways. Beyond the ICC testimonies of witnesses like Dorabji and Bilimoria, who saw no clear means of homogenizing a film’s address without segmenting audiences or excluding sections of it, is the film producer J. B. H. Wadia’s vision of commercial cinema. Wadia recounts, in later years, his appreciation of the boisterous and diverse mass Indian audiences of silent films. He evidently saw Hollywood films from the cheap seats, though it meant that the “ones who had a smattering of the [English] language would read aloud and translate [titles] in a Babel of their respective vernaculars for the benefit of those who did not know the common language of the British Empire.” Wadia recalls lying prostrate on the front benches to hold seats for his friends, shouting at screen villains and heroes, and looking at V.I.P. seats where “the door keeper would enter pompously as if he was a super star coming on the stage from the wings holding a silver pigani (spray) of rose water.” Not surprisingly, Wadia’s popular early productions were front-bench, crowd-pleasing, stunt-action films and fantasies like Toofan Mail (1932) and Lal-e-Yaman (1933).

Each film-industry member constructed an idiom of Indian cinema that responded to his or her definition of Indian cinema’s key consumer base, and their answers to the ICC reflected this. Beyond evaluating the witnesses’ personal politics, discussions of the ICC must keep an eye toward how the
committee was institutionally predisposed to sorting cinema's representative constituencies. As products of a colonial society, the committee’s members and its witnesses navigated between indebtedness to imperial modernity and an investment in a national industry. Their definitions of cinema immediately expressed their own varying positions in an intermediary space of (cultural, political) subordination to the colonizers while pioneering a (cultural, political) form. The unquestioned use of English for the ICC’s exchanges suggests the committee’s institutionally mediate position; so does its strict adherence to individuals who were deemed film “specialists,” and its loyalty to institutions considered socially relevant or elevating (such as school principals, heads of local YMCAs, or members of societies monitoring public morality) to the exclusion of less socially established or reputable industry participants. In an absence of the ICC’s interest in the opinions of India’s growing mass film audience, their perceptions remain inaccessible to analysis, but interrogating the boundaries of the ICC’s investigative parameters and of their witnesses’ evaluative ones underscores the intersecting colonial and national forces shaping the interviews.

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In 1933, six years after the ICC interviews, a lengthy debate ensued in the Indian Legislative Assembly over one of the committee’s suggestions. An Indian assembly member proposed a resolution demanding that the British India government remove import duties on raw film stock entering India. One of the people speaking in favor of the removal of the tariff on film stock was K. C. Neogy, who had served on the ICC board. He refers to the ICC in the following manner.

I have heard uncharitable critics of Government say that the reason why the enthusiasm of Government in regard to this [ICC] inquiry had oozed out was to be found in the recommendations of the Committee itself. These uncharitable critics say, for instance, that one of the objects of the appointment of this Committee was to get a kind of preference for the British film producer in the Indian market. . . . To their surprise, continue these uncharitable critics, the Government found that this Committee, composed as it was of an equal number of Englishmen and Indians, had positively refused to make any recommendations of that character. On the other hand, they made a series of unanimous recommendations for the development of and encouragement of the Indian industry. I quite admit
that most of the recommendations would involve a financial outlay on the part of the Government, but there are certain recommendations which would require not so much financial assistance.”

Neogy uses the rhetorical trope of “uncharitable critics” in interesting ways. Perhaps I am one of those uncharitable souls today, in that I foreground the ICC’s origin in British trade initiatives. But Neogy uses the device to stage a series of criticisms against the government as well, for its neglect of the ICC’s mildest recommendations. As he notes, the commission’s suggestion to remove taxation of raw film stock would neither have required financial outlay nor would it have counted as state protectionism. Compared to the positive state support extended to British films with the Quota Acts, the imperial state was actively hurting Indian cinema with its tariff policy. The Indian Department of Industries and Labor, represented by Sir Frank Noyce, put a damper on the motion to remove raw film tax in India once again, by arguing that the state could not be compensated for its loss of income from the tax cut. As with the ICC interviews, nothing was achieved for the Indian film industry, and the state maintained its status quo. But the process called into account inconsistencies in British state policy regarding film in the empire.

A historiography that includes markets that didn’t materialize, films that were not distributed, and bills that were not passed reveals conflicts that existed as disruptive preambles to regulatory initiatives. Among such conflicts lie shadowy histories of resistance to the state. In the British State’s numerous standing committees, inquiry commissions, roundtable conferences, and acts through which it governed India, the consignment of the ICC’s final report to some dusty filing system might well be a testimony of its success; in a contrary sense, it is the report’s function as a failed preface to any regulation that makes it an ideal locus for studying how and why imperial ideology collapsed, adapted, and re-presented itself in different forms when under attack. However subtly, the Indian film industry, itself under definition, played a role in reshaping the British State’s agenda, particularly when it was uncooperative in furthering state policy initiatives.

In 1937 when the FBI and the BT expressed renewed interest over the possibility of mobilizing an empire film market, the India Office flatly discouraged them. To quote A. Dibdin of the Economic and Overseas Department, direct state involvement in the Indian film industry was impossible because “nowadays . . . any question of tariff adjustment tends to become a matter of bargaining in which each side expects to receive an equivalent of some
kind from the other.” The colonial film industry’s new expectation of real reciprocity put paid to further negotiations. Noting that Britain produced commercial films for home rather than Indian consumption, the India Office suggests that British producers should first establish themselves in Britain and “first seek to penetrate the American market” before attempting to enter the colony. Interestingly, British empire films that transformed India and Africa into picturesque themes for commercial blockbusters did precisely that: they won America.