part three  *  COLONIAL AUTONOMY
Sust banane vali filmen koyi aur hongi, meri Diamond Queen nahin! (Other films may make you lethargic, but never my Diamond Queen!)

—“Fearless” Nadia, Diamond Queen songbook, 1941

Whatever the academic theories of profit, not labour, not capital, not skill, alone or in concert, can make profits for an Industry, if there is no National Government to help it. In this struggle of yours, therefore, you have a handicap, for India has no National Government of her own. And therefore, whether you wish it or not, the place of this Industry will always be with those who are struggling to achieve such Government for this country.

—Chandulal J. Shah, addressing the First Indian Motion Picture Congress, 1939

seven  *  HISTORICAL ROMANCES AND MODERNIST MYTHS IN INDIAN CINEMA

Three linked factors may be disaggregated as formative influences on Indian film aesthetics in the late-colonial era: their allusive commentary on the nationalist project and on British imperialism through visualizations of a new civil society; their origins in pre-cinematic as well as modern Indian art forms; and their function in giving Indian films a competitive edge over Hollywood and other film imports by borrowing and localizing their attractions. The task of teasing out and rethreading these aspects of colonial cinema is made simpler by the foundational work of literary and film scholars of Indian silent and early sound film. Consequently, a brief review of recent theories of Indian cinema opens this chapter, directed by a focus on film art. Such a summary prevents a construction of comparative frameworks premised on an implicit universalization of European or Hollywood aesthetic predilections. It also serves as a reminder that descriptions of “Indian” themes and styles cannot be hypostasized, because asserting a cultural identity was crucial to the industry’s survival as a trade, which was artificially impeded by its government and domestically dominated by film imports until the late 1930s.
Just as British empire cinema reflected the circumstances of Hollywood domination and imperial destabilization, Indian films thematized a country’s struggle for nationhood while attempting to gain a foothold in a colonially constrained and competitive domestic market. The construction of Indian sensibilities and visualities betrayed this cosmopolitan awareness of other market forces and films, and additionally created what the film historian Ashish Rajadhyaksha has called a “modern industrial idiom of neo-traditionalism.”

Aesthetic Terms as Terms of Comparison

Theorists of Indian cinema have challenged and extended the concept of realism as derived from Euro-American film theory in two related ways: through a study of the absence, resistance, or more properly the uneven incorporation of “Renaissance” constructions of perspective in pre-cinematic Indian cultural production; and by analyzing the function of realism and melodrama in the creation of a national consensus in postcolonial India. Rajadhyaksha developed the first approach in relation to Dadasaheb Phalke’s films, and scholars writing for the *Journal of Arts and Ideas* in the late 1980s and early 1990s extended the analysis. Rajadhyaksha notes that traditional Indian visual forms such as *pat* paintings, which depicted stories through images on a flat surface that would be lit and scanned serially by a mobile viewer, were premised on a “frontal encounter between a usually flat—often deliberately flattened—planar image and an audience gaze.” Commercial market (bazaar) art and still photography introduced perspectival codes of figuration aimed at creating an ideal viewer position, to present a deceptive sense of three-dimensional reality. Early silent Indian cinema is constituted by a tension between these two forms of viewing, with a dimension of narrative temporality added to the flat *pat* aesthetic, thus combining the latter’s emphasis on a “collective public gaze” with the former’s mobilization of a perpendicular axis of perspective.

Films like *Shri Krishna Janma* and *Kaliya Mardan* (Phalke, 1919) offer ideal examples of this dynamic combination of frontally direct address and contiguous spaces. In *Shri Krishna Janma* the audience is performed to, as Lord Krishna faces us while his devotees (identified by caste as the Brahmin, the Kshatriya, the Vaishyabhakta, and the Shudra) crowd around him and offer their prayers sequentially. Such a staged, frontal composition may be linked to descriptions of the look mobilized by a dominant mode of Indian cinema “governed
by a pre-modern institutionalized structure of spectation embodied in the tradition of darsana.” The concept of darsana (seeing the temple deity; also used reverentially or sarcastically for more secular sightings, such as seeing a special friend or a friend rarely seen) carries explicitly Hindu connotations, making the term problematic as a generic model of South Asian visuality. Sandria B. Freitag expands Indian visual traditions beyond the darsanic to include the gaze mobilized in a courtly durbar (the ceremonious space where Mughal rulers met their subjects) and by live performances of the precolonial era. Underlying all three notions of visuality is an element different from the voyeurism that sutures a viewer to the text as defined by Hollywood film theorists. Here there is more of a sense of interaction across distance, of iconity to the image, and of an explicitly (rather than invisibly) hierarchical structuring of the image that intrudes into film’s mimetic capabilities.

Sumita Chakravarty explores an epistemology of non-mimesis in Indian art, particularly in classical Sanskrit theater’s “rasasutra (theory of aesthetic enjoyment) of depersonalized emotions.” Borrowing from literary scholar Meenakshi Mukherjee, she argues that mimetic art was imported into India with Victorian novels and only partially assimilated into the indigenous novel of the nineteenth century, which subsequently exercised some influence on Indian film narratives. Following these definitions, we may conclude that realism is not an aesthetic intrinsically related to Indian pre-cinematic and early cinematic traditions, and that it was never entirely incorporated into the dominant form of Indian literature or commercial Indian cinema.

Situating these theories of Indian film form in relation to definitions of narrative or classical realism creates a revealing category crisis. If classical realism is a technique produced by subsuming cinema’s spatiotemporal articulations under the dictates of narrative, then the Indian film form’s affinity to nonrealism appears to be perpetually modernist, particularly (and paradoxically) when constituted by traditional Indian modes of visuality. To clarify the confusion, we need to distinguish between nonrealism, realism, and modernism as aesthetic descriptors, and to introduce into our discussion the concept of modernity as a historical category.

Too diffuse and complex to allow a swift definition, modernity may be inadequately characterized as the secularization of religious, dynastic, and monarchic notions of time, space, polity, and community, initiated by scientific and technological revolutions since the 1700s. The filmic medium has been considered emblematic of late modernity because, like the railways, the X-ray, or the telephone, it utilizes technology and industry to alter the
experience of time, space, vision, and sound. Arguably, premodern as well as nonrealist forms of visuality pre-existed modern encounters between nonrealist, realist and modernist visual tropes in Indian cinema. In such descriptions, however, modernity becomes an inescapable condition of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and we may pause to consider if India’s (or Europe’s, for that matter) immersion in modernity during or after colonialism was ever all that complete. More to the point, we need to ask what modernity meant to India. What was the degree to which it was embedded in colonial practices? What was the extent to which it acted as a transporter of Western imperialism? What was the manner in which the national category of “India” was defined in conjunction, opposition, or resistance to this modernity?

In answering such questions, theorists writing about the political modernity of the postcolonial state have enabled a historical inflection of and internal differentiation in the study of realism in the Indian context. I bracket modernism for the time being, as it has not been a central focus of critical attention in relation to colonial cinema. The reasons for this neglect and a case for revisiting modernism are explored further. For now, cinematic modernism, like cinematic realism, may be understood as a response to historical modernity. Specifically, modernism may be characterized as a range of aesthetic symptoms manifesting both the euphoria of change and “an anxiety of contamination” produced by the decolonization, democratization, commercialization, and massification of culture, society, and politics.

Chakravarty views realism as a “stabilizing discourse” that attempts to control the unnerving changes of industrialization, urbanization, and the spread of consumerism in the modern Indian nation-state. For Chakravarty, realism is primarily associated with the middle-class project of cultural consensus building. Consequently, she reads realist cinema’s failure at the commercial box office—demonstrated through the poor popular reception of critically acclaimed Hindi films like Dharti Ke Lal (Abbas, 1946), Neecha Nagar (Anand, 1946), and Do Bigha Zamin (Roy, 1953)—as an index of middle-class alienation from the masses. She carries this idea forward to the realism of “new or parallel” cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, such as Ankur (Bengal, 1973), Garam Hawa (Sathyu, 1973), and Manthan (Benegal, 1976), to note that such films lacked “a vital communication with or articulation of a larger national experience.”

Chakravarty’s utilization of Indian films funded by state as well as private sources incorporating neorealist as well as classical-realist and experi-
mental styles to develop a broad theory of realism creates conceptual difficulties. The didacticism, regionalism, and naturalism of films funded by the state-run Film Finance Corporation (visible in most films of the new-cinema movement of the 1970s) are dissimilar in form and motivation from the self-consciously experimental, progressive productions of the 1940s (like Dharti Ke Lal and Neecha Nagar of the Indian Peoples’ Theater Association, an anti-imperial, anti-Fascist collective). For such differentiations and for a theorization of popular Hindi cinema in relation to state-funded developmentalist realism, Madhava Prasad’s analysis offers greater assistance. Prasad redraws the map of realism by periodizing the dominant Indian film form in relation to shifts in the postcolonial nation-state, discerning two forms of realism involved in producing the modern citizen and creating a social contract post-1947. The first is a “nationalist realism,” wherein realism inheres in the promise to represent reality as it is, as in the work of Satyajit Ray or in Shyam Benegal’s films in the 1970s. The spectator’s gaze, Prasad argues, borrowing from Neil Larson, coincides with the frame (in that the film appears as one with reality), because there is an “absence of any obvious rationalizing authority at the level of narrative.” This invisible mediating presence that transmutes the representation of a specific, “regional” object into something apparently national is similar to the construct of a citizen who is “neither singular” nor “collective” but both simultaneously.

The second form of realism toward which popular Hindi cinema aspires is closer to Hollywood realism, or what Prasad calls realism as a “sign of bourgeois hegemony.” The conditioning imperative for this form comes from a prioritization of “the features of a rationally-ordered society,” where the central unit of the narrative is an individual progressing with credible motivations and goals to ratify the rule of law of his or her own free will. This narrative realism operates by “anchoring the spectator’s gaze in a relation of identification with a central character, and thus the citizen as the individual embodiment of the legal order is called into being.”

Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer offer similar descriptions of realism’s statist functions in their descriptions of black British cinema’s efforts to disrupt realism. In their words, “Representational democracy, like the classic realist text, is premised on an implicitly mimetic theory of representation as correspondence with the ‘real’: notionally, the political character of the state is assumed to ‘correspond’ to the aspiration of the masses in society” which may be represented by a film’s central character or its form. Amir Mufti sees a structuring secular national consciousness present in influential late-
colonial Indian narratives like Mulk Raj Anand’s Untouchable (1935), Nehru’s The Discovery of India (1946), and Premchand’s Godan (1936), which construct the representative national individual as the object or ideal addressee of their narratives. “For the Nehruvian, ‘progressive’ aesthetics that emerged in the 1930s under the influence of the Popular Front conceptions of the artwork and society, telling the truth of society in fiction—‘realism’—amounted to narrating the emergence of this consciousness—the abstract and secular citizen subject—as the highest form of consciousness possible in a colonial society.”

Though secular, nationalist consciousness may be produced through realism, Indian film theorists argue that a realism that resists interruptions to its diegesis and subordinates spectacle to narrative was never entirely digested by the Indian film form, given its predilection to melodrama, to an aesthetic of frontality, to tableau constructions and non-mimetic impulses. Prasad defines Indian cinema’s dominant melodramatic form as a “feudal family romance,” which heterogeneously assimilates a national consensus manufactured by India’s ruling coalition of feudal/colonial and bourgeois/postcolonial élites. The plots of these romances derive their melodrama from nonrealist twists ranging from switches in social rank, dispossessed children of aristocrats, oaths to secrecy, and people in disguise. These characteristics share an affinity with tropes of the Gothic narrative mentioned by Northrop Frye and Peter Brooks. Whereas Frye aims to identify transcendental structures rather than contextually specific ones and Brooks treats melodrama as a modern response to the desacralization of society, Prasad wishes to retain the pre-modern, pre-capitalist allegiances of India’s emerging modern romance form. In structural terms, the romance is a manifestation of the contests and alliances between the emergent bourgeoisie and pre-capitalist overlords, as heterogeneous forms of capital combine to create a postcolonial national culture. In ideological terms, the romance subsumes modern concessions to individualism within hierarchical and feudal depictions of family and morality.

In sum, Indian film aesthetics have been theorized in terms of pre-modern forms of visuality resisting or cohabiting with perspectival visuality as well as classical realism under postcolonial modernity. The association of modernity with the rise of a native bourgeoisie, largely inheritors of social institutions established by the imperial élite, transcribes the struggle between pre-modern and modern visual or narrative regimes into a contest between tradition and modernity, anti-realism and realism, feudalism and capitalism,
though not in neatly overlapping or perfectly chronological ways. Romance, providing the dominant (and dominantly melodramatic) structure for Indian films, is itself read as a site of contestation between precolonial (feudal) versus postcolonial (bourgeois) organizations of state power. Prominently, several theorists connect realism with the project of nation-building, particularly in the postcolonies. Quoting Fredric Jameson, Gyanendra Pandey, and Aijaz Ahmed, who identify the centrality of realism in writing the “biography of the emerging nation-state,” Rajadhyaksha argues that the principle of scientific rationalism in the economic program of nationalist reconstruction found its “aesthetic counterpart” in realism.22 Anthony Appiah makes a similar observation about the first generation of novelists from the colonies (like Chinua Achebe), whose novels provided “realist legitimations of nationalism: they authorize a ‘return to traditions’ while at the same time recognizing the demands of a Weberian rationalised modernity.”23 Realism here is theorized as the dominant form within which traditionalism finds (an albeit difficult and tenuous) reconciliation with modernity in an early phase of the postcolonial state, which is assertive in its defiance of imperialism and dedicated to the activation of a national, rational identity and subjectivity.

Modernism as an aesthetic mode (distinct from the historical experience of political, economic, and social modernity) is less privileged in discussions of colonial Indian cinema, with the notable exceptions of Geeta Kapur’s and Ravi Vasudevan’s readings of the “modern” in Indian art and film, also assessed in relation to the project of nationhood.24 Answering the question “When was modernism in Indian/Third World art?” Kapur argues that the potential “formalistic impasses” of late modernism—such as its “sheer opticality,” preference for “epiphany to materiality,” and its “hypostasis of the new”—were impeded in postcolonial nations, which were constituted by deep investments in defining a collective history and national identity. She suggests that perhaps Indian art was truly modern only in the postmodern era of the 1990s, when the nation began to integrate drastically with the world economy through liberalization. Indian artists were “shocked out of the narrative of identity” to confront “the new without flying into a defense of tradition,” coping with “cultural atomization without resorting to the mythology of an indigenous community.”25 However, Kapur notes, modernist tendencies of Indian art were not so much thwarted or deferred by the compulsions of national identity as perpetually fraught by that disjuncture, rendering modernism a “vexed site” in postcolonial art.26
Far from being a unifying domain of meaning and signification, national identity was itself a vexing construct. The theorization of realism as a cognate of nationalism sensitizes us to the production of a normative consciousness during the period of nationalist legitimation in colonial and postcolonial cinemas. It simultaneously desensitizes us to aesthetics as an indicator of the perceptual, experiential, and ideological disparities that were politicized, but never reconciled, by efforts to create a unified national entity. The study of colonial Indian films allows us to question the theoretical entrenchment of realism and nationhood as the privileged modes of modernity in colonial and postcolonial contexts, because challenges to postcolonial identity and feared inadequacies of nationhood were writ small in colonial cinema’s aesthetic modernisms.

Divided Nation and Diachronic Forms

A social organism of strangers unified by their simultaneous existence in time and by their shared sense of events is popularly Benedict Anderson’s notion of the nation as an “imagined community,” consolidated through print capitalism. According to Anderson, realism provides an “analogue for the idea of a nation” by offering “a complex gloss upon the word ‘meanwhile,’ ” as its narrative weaves together a profusion of occurrences into a simultaneity of comparable events. At the same time it may be argued that such an expanding modern vision produced an inability to reconcile everything within the narrative compulsions of shared significance, when the shock of an elsewhere or the press of the other crowded in on the experience of the here and the now.

Though realism eventually emerged as the preferred mode of consolidating national identity in decolonizing territories, the fight for nationhood entailed an entire range of contradictory experiences that resisted unification, or that succumbed with difficulty to a collective agenda. Partha Chatterjee addresses this problematic in terms of the production of Indian nationalism in relation to the nation’s fragments. Chatterjee describes anticolonial nationalism’s crisis in imagining the colony as a national community (defined by collective tradition and a distinctive identity) governed by a modern state (derived from Western administrative forms), arguing that separating a material from a spiritual sphere, an inner from an outer domain, provided both a palliative to the crisis and a means of producing a hegemonic nationalism. Indian nationalism normalized itself by accepting Western superiority in the
outer, material spheres of science, technology, and statecraft while asserting sovereignty over the inner spheres of domesticity, family, caste, and religion, expanding its sphere of influence through this demarcated and selective adaptation to modernity.\textsuperscript{28} The female body, in this analysis, was one of the inner domains on which anticolonial nationalism carved out its realm of sovereignty to stabilize and unify itself.

It is certainly possible to argue that representations of gender and domesticity in colonial films often functioned to invest an inviolable traditionalism in Indian femininity. The figure of the female was frequently used to criticize degenerate modernization and to distinguish Indian customs from the immodesty of Western social norms. However, I think we do Chatterjee’s insight a disservice if we place a constraint on the analytic of gender and doom women to the realm of tradition without interrogating the mechanisms of, or the resistance to, such assimilations.\textsuperscript{29} As a collective, colonial films display a variety of stylistic efforts that both inscribe and destabilize a neotraditional nationalist ideology through representations of women.

To elaborate on film style in relation to the female figure, I take brief recourse to Aamir Mufti’s astute reading of Saadat Hasan Manto's short stories. Mufti observes that Manto overturns three canonical forms of Indian nationalism, namely, the novel format, the realist narrative, and the symbolic sanctification of the nation as the allegorical all-embracing mother. Through short stories in which female prostitutes are central characters, Manto deploys ironic and defamiliarizing techniques to open up “the familial semiotic of nationalism to interrogation.”\textsuperscript{30} Mufti compellingly presents Manto’s departures from realism and his deviations from celebrated literary and figural forms as an exposure of nationalism’s inauthentic promise of universalism, a promise that Urdu literary formations could not extend unproblematically in the prepartition era.\textsuperscript{31} Without leaping to the conclusion that any departure from realism automatically connotes a critical examination of nationalist ideology, I merely wish to underscore Mufti’s interpretive strategy at this point. As a way of historicizing aesthetics in relation to politics, he deconstructs a literary canon to thematize dissonance within nationalism.

This opens up an additional perspective for the analysis of Indian film aesthetics. As Chakravarty points out, a film text’s realism may mark its proximity to an economic class, evidenced by the Indian intelligentsia’s celebration of Satyajit Ray’s films of the 1950s and 1960s. The same so-called realist films may be assimilated within a modernist discourse of Third World “auteur cinema” in an international context. Additionally, the dominantly
realist text could possess more than one aesthetic mode. Historical oppositions to the production of a uniform vision may produce hybrid styles operating in tandem. Such a dynamic has certainly been noted in post-independence Indian films. Arguing that myth demands a different order of belief and a different psychic investment than realism, film scholars perceive a historical break in the integration of realism with myth after India’s independence. In a complex analysis of the varying investments of narrative realism in mythic material, Kapur notes that “in an earlier phase of nationalist consciousness there was an ebullience of self-discovery through mythic archetype, folk and popular forms,” whereas after independence “the travail of the middle class [was] worked out in psycho-social terms.” 32 With the end of colonialism, realism, as a discourse of rationalized modernity, replaced a previous “hermeneutic of affirmation” with a middle-class “hermeneutic of suspicion” toward myth and traditionalism. 33

Uncertainties regarding tradition were not the exclusive province of post-independence Indian films, though the ebullience of nationalism in colonial India conspired to mask the presence of stylistic and tropic instabilities. Films of the 1930s struck more than one note in conceptualizing tradition, cultural identity, and nationalism through an aesthetic hybridity that was historically specific to a period of enfeebled imperial rule, volatile nationalism, and a competitive film market. The representation of gender, and more broadly the representation of difference, accentuated these instabilities. Articulations of a modern civil society demanded new roles for the nation’s problematic subjects. Varying aesthetic modes tugged toward opposing resolutions, pointed to different futures, and unsettled a straightforward triumphalism in the discourse of the emerging nation-state, as filmmakers invented a range of narrative- and image-types for including subaltern subjects into a modern India.

The figure of the Indian female exposes the pitfalls of colonial nationalism and its uneasy relationship with tradition as well as modernity. Miriam Hansen argues in connection with silent Shanghai films that while “female figures may well be the privileged fetish of male/modernist projection and stereotyping, they are also the sites of greatest ambivalence and mobility.” 34 She quotes the more “differentiated typology” of female figures offered by Yingjin Zhang to propose that female protagonists “exceed or resist” allegorical labels, to embody the contradictions of the “New Woman” who “oscillate[s] among different types and incompatible identities.” 35 Chatterjee’s focus on the “new patriarchy” and the “powers of hegemonic national-
ism to take in its stride a whole range of dissenting voices” suppresses the disturbance around the figure of this new woman. Colonially, predominantly reformist, patriarchal, and working within colonial bourgeois realist modes nevertheless shows glimpses of “creative, and plural development of social identities” that threatened the emergent dominant nationalist ideology.

British empire cinema responded with at least three predominant aesthetic resolutions to the question, “Why do we retreat?” Despite the absence of an identifiable anti-imperial genre of Indian cinema during the colonial period, the dominant genres of historicals, mythologicals, and socials offered a diverse range of answers to their interrogatives: “Under what conditions will we get self-governance?” and “In what form or style may we imagine it?” Indian films in the historical genre depicted imaginary pasts, while mythologicals incorporated stories from Indian epics and puranas, or constructed fables to narrate allegorical tales about Indian society. Indian socials used contemporary settings to unfold melodramatic narratives about family and community.

Historicals and mythologicals were eventually superseded (though by no means erased) by reformist socials, which adapted elements of classical realism to a melodramatic template by the 1940s.

The aesthetics of realism, romance, and modernism cannot be neatly divided across these film genres, though arguably historicals and mythologicals offered fewer avenues for realism because of their investment in fantasy, pictorialism, ornate sets, theatrical dialogues, and allegory. Nevertheless in all genres, realist, romance, and modernist aesthetics intermesh to convey different attitudes toward colonial cinema’s central referents: India’s past, its future, and its modern constituents. Indian colonial cinema transposed visions of a future egalitarian civil society on its feudal past, though reclaiming a precolonial past for the nation demanded the difficult reconfiguration of India’s internal subalterns as modern citizens. In the modernisms of Indian cinema’s historicals and myths of the 1930s are cues to what stood in the way of a quest for ideological coherence and homogenization under the sign of the nation.

**Historical Romances**

In addition to monitoring sexual content, film censors of the 1930s excised material depicting political insurrection and civic disruption in Indian films. Almost in direct defiance, Indian historicals repeatedly enacted a crisis of au-
thority in governance. Historicals were different from socials in their placement of a film’s dramatic action in antiquity; they literally erased the presence of foreign colonizers by transposing visions of a future nation onto a fantasized past. The political function of historicals was only thinly veiled from the Government of India, which was quick to censor even the most concealed nationalist message. In a lucid statement about historical literary fiction, the Indian Legislative Department noted with regard to a case before the Allahabad High Court, “The mere fact that [a] book is in the form of a history does not by any means make improper the conclusion that the book is written with the intention of bringing into hatred and contempt the present system of government. History is not written in water-tight compartments and the reader of history is accustomed to look for continuity.” Of higher profile was the case of nationalist leader Bal Gangadhar Tilak, who published a historical analysis of the battle between Shivaji and Afzal Khan in his Marathi language journal, Kesari. Reacting to the Kesari article, members of the legislature asked how they might know “whether [Tilak’s] intention was simply to publish a historical discussion” or “to stir up under that guise hatred against the Government?”

The state gauged sedition based on assessments of intent; novels and films were of interest to the state for their submerged meanings and for their intentional as well as unintentional effects. On the latter grounds, the film Sikandar was originally approved by the Bombay Censor Board and subsequently uncertified (that is, the board revoked its certificate in order to prohibit its exhibition) in cantonment theaters. The film depicts Alexander (Sikandar) the Great’s invasion of India and his confrontation with King Porus who, as the story goes, remained righteous in defeat. The film was censored because of its depiction of Sikandar’s mutinous troops and for its nationalistic pride in Porus.

More than socials, which tended to be explicitly reformist tales addressed to contemporary India, historicals and mythologicals possessed the allusive nature of a parable. The abstraction of evil in such films allowed them great mobility in social criticism, as the wicked were used to symbolize both imperial authoritarianism as well as regressive Indian customs. Diler Jigar (a.k.a. Gallant Hearts) and Ghulami nu Patan are two surviving silents made by the Agarwal Film Company in 1931 that tell stories of corrupt kings and intrepid swashbucklers, replete with fights, romantic love scenes, and chases. Rajadhyaksha calls Diler Jigar a “freewheeling adaptation of the historical” that brings together “Fairbank’s Mark of Zorro (1920) emphasis on action and decor, with the balletic Nautanki [Indian folk dance-drama] idiom, notably
in the picturizing of the plentiful sword fights.” Though shots in both films are frequently framed as tableaus, they cinematically condense and expand time, and bring audiences to shocking proximities and vertiginous distances from the staged action. The films perfectly demonstrate Indian silent cinema’s grasp of the medium’s modernity put to the service of indigenous visual and narrative idioms.

In the first few shots Diler Jigar introduces the film’s moral polarities: King Bholanath, “a benign King, the idol of the people,” versus his plotting brother, Kalsen. (Intertitles for silent films were typically in English, Hindi, Urdu and a regional language, which in this case was Gujarati). King Bholanath, the “friend of the needy and the poor,” is soon killed at Kalsen’s command by his man Kritant. Time moves quickly in a series of suggestive dissolves from Kritant poisoning the king’s drink, to a shot of the king’s crown on a tray, to a shot showing the crown on Kalsen’s head. Evil usurps power with a visual and narrative ease. This is economical: Kalsen’s machinations, which convert his cupidity toward the crown into manifest reality, are conveyed through efficient dissolves. It is also melodramatic: the narrative is immediately identifiable as a world horribly out of balance, a perverted order.

Ghulami nu Putan has a similar structure and begins with the following intertitles.
About the year 1818 in the reign of Rana Bhimsingh—the Emperor of Marwar there was a system of slavery called “Gola.” For peasants who couldn’t pay the land tax, their women would be outraged, especially by Lord of Karangarth, Kumar Umedhsingh, and his lieutenants.

The first shot of the film moves from a close up of a wine pitcher to a drunken king abusing women, followed by shots of male peasants attached to a plough. The faces of the peasants remain insignificant; instead, close ups of their twitching, bleeding backs, marked by lashes, convey their dehumanization as they are speared and whipped while tilling the land. The familiar colonial predicament of famine and poverty caused by fixed imperial taxation and a lack of government assistance are transformed here into an almost abstract image of subjection to authoritarianism.

Representations of absolute power and abject powerlessness bring to the structure of historical films an element that A. K. Ramanujan identifies in oral Indian folktales about women. Ramanujan notes that tales with male protagonists and secondary female characters end in marriage “for they speak of the emancipation of the hero from the parental yoke and the setting up of a new family, as he comes into his own.” In woman-centered oral folktales, however, the woman is already married or married early “and then the woman’s troubles begin.” In such stories, the woman’s heroism lies in her suffering and her righteous behavior, which restores value to her corrupted domestic ideal. Hers is less a physical quest than a story of forbearance, devotion, and faith despite a betrayed ideal—a story of moral virtues that eventually restabilize her disrupted home life. (This is also apparent in the classical stories of Savitri and Shakuntala from the Hindu epic, the Mahabharatha). Rather than essentializing these into male and female narratives, I would argue that the observation of structural repetitions in women-centered folk tales provides the insight that female social subjugation receives formal acknowledgment in oral tales. A woman’s exploitation and limited options for deliverance are marked in folk narratives through suffering that commences near the story’s opening and through a depiction of her reliance on moral virtue rather than willful action to reverse a wretched fate.

Diler Jigar and Ghulami nu Patan are commercial quest narratives about strong men who reclaim a lost kingdom and gain a consort through their brave deeds. More viscerally, however, these films also follow the rhythms of woman-centered folktales, given their narrative’s depictions of complete abjection in a corrupted “home” and demands for moral strength. The two
forms of romance—of dispossession, travel, and a violent physical quest on the one hand, and of unfulfilled ideals, interiority, and a spiritual quest on the other—indicate two different categories of social positioning, frequently gendered as male and female. Their coexistence in historicals of the 1930s and their embodiment in both male and female characters implicitly appeals to both the revolutionary and pacifist factions of the nationalist movement, conveying that physical revolt is incomplete without inner strength in the attempt to regain one’s domestic realm. The male character in Nee-cha Nagar maintains, “Qurbani ka sabak aurat hi sikha sakti hai” [the lesson of sacrifice can only be taught by a woman], but he must nevertheless learn this lesson to achieve his goals. Physical strength is presented as incomplete without patience and resilience during the nationalist struggle, and the socially gendered aspects of these qualities are necessarily androgynized to transform men and women into a national community. Substructures of (presumptively women-centric) melodramatic folktales are indistinguishable from (presumptively male-centric) action or quest narratives in a context where both appeals are used to redeem a people without physical or moral authority in their own home, by proving them worthy in every way of its reclamation. Like the Gandhian satyagraha (the struggle for truth), the pursuit of righteousness becomes the path of resistance for those deprived of constitutional means of justice. Forbearance here represents the tool of the materially weak and morally strong.

Indian historicals were structured as romances to tell stories of a colony’s victimization and unrealized power by staking physical and moral claims on the homeland. Demonstrations of physical as well as spiritual strength are central to the progress of the historical film’s narrative and to its speculatization. On the surface, such colonial romances appear to share the rhythms of imperial romances when conceptualized in the broadest terms of abjection and eventual triumph. However, imperial fiction’s drama of retreat (rather than reclamation) is founded on the physical evacuation of the female, who remains identified with an absent domestic space, retained in the narrative primarily through a spectral feminization of the colonial male. The colonial historical romance’s inclusion of male and female subjects and its weakened gender-specificity in attributing (physical and moral, public and private) demonstrations of heroism pulls the narrative in new directions. Historically motivated hybrid demands on narrative structures of address to the nation alter the possibilities for the portrayal of female characters.

In Diler Jigar, for instance, the murdered King Bholanath’s son, Hameer,
grows up in anonymity as an acrobat, unaware of his aristocratic roots. Unknowingly, he returns to his kingdom with his beloved Saranga and her brother Balbheem to perform street-entertainment acts. Hameer is a variation on the character of Azim, the dethroned prince from Britain’s historical romance The Drum, living out his narrative fate in an Indian film that has erased the figure of a British ally and sketched in the figure of an Indian woman. The group’s encounters with royalty occasion stunts and humor, as the brave trio scale walls, dance with swords, and are bewildered by royal clothes. A misunderstanding arises between Saranga and Hameer, when he spies her briefly dazzled by royal wealth and weakening to King Kalsen’s lascivious advances. After this event, the two follow divergent paths in fighting the king. Hameer opposes the king openly, aroused by rallying calls that carry thinly veiled anti-imperial messages such as, “Stir yourself... at least to wreak vengeance upon this tyrant, who has ruined all your life and happiness” and “Friends, how long will you bear the tyranny of this king?”44 Saranga, rejected by Hameer, turns into a masked avenger who protects Hameer and helps the oppressed. Saranga’s silent fidelity and pursuit of a righteous battle are accompanied by physical heroics, which lead to her eventual reconciliation with Hameer. On the one hand, her veil of secrecy (in comparison to Hameer’s direct confrontation of the king) dramatizes the predicament of...
Indian women as symbols of inviolable national identity; this is the interpretation Rajadhyaksha prefers in his reading of the film.\textsuperscript{45} On the other hand, Saranga’s very entry into the public sphere of combat draws attention to Indian nationalism’s impossibility without an inclusive and participatory politics.

In both silent historical films, women are portrayed as essential in facilitating the downfall of evil regimes. In \textit{Ghulam} \textit{nu Patan} two of the most visually memorable sequences involve talismanic objects used by women. Kamalbala, the object of the dastardly King Umedhsingh’s unwanted attentions, stands framed by a doorway in a picturesque medium shot with her father, followed by a flashback sequence that shows them helping a man who gives Kamalbala a ring, with the promise to help them in an hour of need. Her later use of the ring to remind the mysterious man of his word draws a powerful ally (Kartar Singh, the Lord of Amargarth and later her suitor) into the fray of the battle. The second visual sequence involves King Umedhsingh’s wife, who betrays her husband by unlocking a prison door to help innocent captives. The scene takes on a symbolic function because of its extremely close shot of a gigantic lock that covers a third of the frame, with a key turned by the hand of this mysterious woman otherwise insignificant to the plot. Symbols in this instance endow the first woman’s words and the second’s deeds with a transformative power. Female figures rehearse a conflict between loyalty to a misguided authority figure (a king, a husband) and loyalty to a higher cause (justice, emancipation), altering the fate of the narrative by their choice of the latter. Such choices confront minor as well as major female characters.

Historical romances present an opportunity for equivocation around conflicting principles, with each character intensifying the level of symbolic conflict. Exaggeratedly dramatic speech influenced by Parsi and Shakespearean theater, multiple plots, heightened use of character for symbolism, reduced character development, and an episodic structure defeat the historical film’s realism. Sohrab Modi’s Minerva Movietone productions such as \textit{Pukar} and \textit{Sikandar} (which may also be considered early Muslim socials) contain dialogues that acquire greater weight than the characters, altering the film’s gender politics. \textit{Pukar}, for instance, is about the conflict between mercy and justice, and the clash of personal and political duty. Sangram Singh (Sohrab Modi), a loyal servant of Emperor Jehangir (Chandramohan), hunts down his fugitive son and brings him before the royal court because, as a criminal, his son is legal property (“\textit{kanoon ki amaanat}”). Once Sangram Singh imprisons his son as a loyal subject of his king, he pleads for royal mercy
as a devoted father. Jehangir is torn as well, as a man who would like to be merciful to his faithful servant’s son and as an emperor who must mete out impartial justice. The film’s central crisis is staged around Jehangir’s wife, Mumtaz Mahal (Naseem Banu). The empress, aiming at a bird, accidentally kills a washerman. Before they discover this fatality, Jehangir and Mumtaz Mahal engage in an intense debate in which the empress role-plays the emperor and scoffs at his incomplete justice, which sentences to death a man who has taken another’s life, without the ability to return life to the former. Jehangir initially argues against mercy but must eventually revise his position. The emperor finds a malleable and merciful justice preferable to blind law once he personally realizes the devastating import of a death sentence. In the process, Mumtaz Mahal has the opportunity to instruct her husband on principled action when she willingly accepts punishment, refusing to destabilize the basis of his authority or let him abandon justice for love. As a collective, these films give women the power of mind, morals, and physical action.  

Female displays of physical prowess in films like Diler Jigar also demonstrate Indian cinema’s absorption of the appeals of Hollywood stunt and
action films. By the end of the 1920s there was evidence of a growing audience base for Indian films, particularly among the lower classes. In 1928 the Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee noted that “The [Hollywood] ‘serial’ . . . has lost its former popularity (with literate and semi-literate classes) and has been largely supplanted by the Indian film.”

Homi Wadia’s Wadia Movietone productions of Hunterwali (Hindi, 1935), Diamond Queen (Hindi, 1940), and Bombaiwali (Hindi, 1941), which popularized the physically powerful, masked, and “Fearless” Nadia with her whip and her faithful gang of rebels, drew directly from the Hollywood stunt film’s palate of appeals. The producer J. B. H. Wadia later commented on the influence of “‘manly’ heroines like Maria Walcampe and Pearle White” on him, in films where “Pearl White’s prowess was a match for Francis Ford, William Farnum and Herbert Rawlinson. Ruth Roland and Helen Gibson were not far behind them in stunt-pulling and acrobatics.”

Beyond remodeling the Hollywood stunt film, Indian romances that featured the masked female vigilante confounded a parallel effort in North India to “purify” images of the Indian female. Charu Gupta discusses the Hindu nationalist efforts to “cleanse” Hindi literature and poetry of the influence of sringar rasa, which had been its dominant mode for over 300 years. Known as the “Riti Kal” of vernacular Hindi poetry and literature dating back to the late sixteenth century, this literature built on an earlier Sanskritic convention of combining sringar rasa with devotional poetry, as in Jayadeva’s Gita Govinda. Riti Kal poetry played on the ambiguities between obsessive spiritual and sensual yearnings of the protagonist for their lover and (or) the divine. Erotic and detailed descriptions of the female body were a central trope of this poetry, which by the early twentieth century was decried as corrupting. As Gupta notes, during the modern “Dwivedi period” of Hindi literature, a powerful faction of nationalists reinvented India’s past as heroic, austere, and masculine. Scholars like Bharatendu Harishchandra celebrated the vir rasa of literature, which was written in praise of the bravery of Rajput and Maratha warriors. Such literary nationalists also aimed to cleanse Hindi of the influence of Urdu, Persian, and Arabic in order to establish its Sanskritic linguistic purity.

Happily, during this period of literary nationalism, cinema as a commercial mass medium depended on appealing to the largest possible audience base and invented an extremely contaminated language. As Mukul Kesavan argues, an Urdu-inflected Hindi thrived in Indian cinema because it was the more popular and prevalent linguistic form of colonial North India. Addi-
tionally, in including the essential box-office ingredients of specular pleasures, dialogic flourishes, visual celebrations of the female form, and romantic love, cinema absorbed the excised srngar rasa and reinvented it for a modern medium. Combining scopophilic delights, spectacles of bravery and romance, comedy, and Hollywood-style antics to produce a visual language that cannot be easily catalogued with other nationalist myths about militant men and women (like the deified Rani of Jhansi), the historical romance incorporates Hindu nationalism’s demonized trope of srngar rasa alongside its valorized vir rasa. If cinema commodified the female form as never before, its beautiful screen female with her sassy dialogues and whip appeared as an abomination to those who preferred to keep their gendered rasas separate.

While it may be argued that Fearless Nadia’s outré acrobatics were acceptable to Indian audiences because of Nadia’s foreign origins (she was Australian), historicals stretched the Indian female figure to do more than physical gymnastics. Pronouncedly, historical films depicted conflicts between forms of governance; the potential corruptibility of all authority in these narratives prioritized abstract principles (such as justice, righteousness, mercy) above any king, father, or husband, thus presenting women with a range of commitments that superseded their duty as wives, mothers, daughters, and loyal subjects. In Sikandar, for instance, self-respect and loyalty to country are more
The historical film mixes vir and sringar rasas with an ornate set and a picturesque Prithviraj in Sikandar. Courtesy NFAI.

important than familial duty. The film is well known in the annals of Indian film history for using the Indian King Porus's (Sohrab Modi) battle against the invading forces of Sikandar (Prithviraj Kapoor) as an analogy for India's struggle for independence. One of the sisters of a petty ruler opposes her brother in his wish to side with Sikandar's forces to win an internecine battle against Porus (an event reminiscent of the in-fighting that made the region pliable to the East India company's political ambitions). In this narrative, the woman's obedience to an abstract higher authority disrupts her assimilation within an existing familial structure, while it consolidates her allegiance to a future, utopian state.

This crisis of loyalty speaks to the absence of a national government at the center, which attenuates the cultural narrative's investment in a singular definition of authority. Prevarications around questions of governance offer resistance to techniques of classical realism. As argued by film theorists, one of the preconditions for classical realism is an invisible validation of a given social structure as the most rational one, with a unified protagonist embodying the ideal citizen and the narrative structure validating the dominant legal order. Narrative crises and dialogic situations surrounding the definition of proper conduct and authority interrupt such invisibility. Formally, in post-
independence-era films, family and state are closely allied with each other and the nation-state acts as the pervasive agent in a relay of authority that begins with the family.\textsuperscript{51} In colonial films, however, the ideological relay between family, nation, and state is inhibited, given the actual absence of an Indian nation-state. In fact, the relay is under construction within the purview of fantasy and willed compulsion. As Chandulal Shah said in his address to the First Indian Motion Picture Congress, “Whether you wish it or not, the place of this Industry will always be with those who are struggling to achieve such Government for this country.” Colonial cinema’s realization of an ideal future society is contingent on an Antigone-like rejection of (the potentially authoritarian, unreliable, or corrupt) contemporary state/community.\textsuperscript{52} The colonial historical most closely fulfils a people’s romance with the notion of a future Indian nation, imagined as a predestined tryst with one’s unrealized but innate, antique potential for righteous self-governance.

The historical romance’s staged crises around the notion of governance acknowledges competing claims upon the ideal citizen/subject, whose choices bring them into conflict with their present community or governing family.\textsuperscript{53} Within a patriarchal tradition where the woman is held as the generative center of her domestic sphere and frequently considered symbolically
indistinguishable from it, such admissions of conflicting interests are potentially transgressive. The Indian nationalist movement’s appeal for women’s increased involvement in public and political life registers its presence vividly in the Fearless Nadia films, which show images of physically strong women outside their homes, exercising, participating in public forums, or actively fighting the villains. In subtler ways, similar redefinitions of the woman’s social role manifest themselves in historical and mythological films that permit female characters to make choices not solely determined by their domestic loyalties.

Certainly colonial representations of women also recuperate a neotraditional patriarchy. In melodramatic socials as varied as Gunsundari (Shah, 1934) and Thyagabhoomi, for instance, misguided and Westernized husbands force their wives out of home, only to be humbled by the woman’s chastity and indestructible traditionalism. In both cases, the narratives deify the female figure and represent her as the ideal woman of a future nation-state. Historicals, however, have a weakened investment in the consequences of the woman’s choices for herself. Primarily, her choice is either a pretext for rhetorical pronouncements about individual or political ideals, or an alibi for spectacles of the new woman in action in public spaces, or in dialogic situations. As Nadia says in Diamond Queen, “Hind ko azaad hona hai to Hind ki
aurat ko bhi azaad hona hoga” [If India is to be independent, then so must her women]. The gap between secular nationalism’s demand to emancipate women and religious nationalism’s need to secure women from modernization, typically closed by the machinations of a new patriarchy, remains relatively open in colonial historicals.

**Modernist Myths**

If modernism, as Andreas Huyssen argues, is “a response to the long march of the commodity through culture,” then colonial modernism was constituted partially as a response to the fear that national commodities would march to the tune of imperial technologies of production, vision, and power. Modernism’s ambivalence toward its own origins in the massification of culture was exacerbated in a colonial context, wherein the colony’s national bourgeoisie were caught between two potential antagonists: the Western imperial state that controlled the terms of commercialization, and the subaltern mass consumer who betokened a debasement of the arts. Ascriptions to aestheticist notions of art’s autonomy from the market and, contrarily, a faith in cinema’s ability to democratize culture were both constitutive factors of Indian colonial cinema’s modernism. Mythological films drew their impetus from both responses.

The director V. Shantaram’s film *Amar Jyoti* can be understood as modernist myth in this sense: it illustrates that the mythic narrative navigates complex demands on colonial cinema to be modern yet Indian, commercial yet artistic, by aestheticizing a mass commodity. To do so, the film incorporates allusions to Indian myths alongside references to local forms of popular entertainment and stylized quotations from European art cinema, infusing idioms of accessible entertainment with a more elevated discourse. Like historicals, myths explore the realm of fantasy and legend that seems apparently removed from India’s present. *Amar Jyoti* superimposes a mythic adventure upon the ostensibly “lower” genres of a stunt film to tell the story of the pirate queen Saudamini (Durga Khote).

Saudamini is in rebellion against patriarchy, and by the film’s conclusion she succeeds in symbolically passing on her eternal torch (*amar jyoti*) of revolt to the film’s central romantic couple. Much of the film operates at the level of allegory, initiated by its abstract opening shot of flames floating and lighting each other. Their connotation of a spreading revolution is undercut in the first few sequences, which depict Saudamini and her men violently burning
a ship that belongs to Princess Nandini (Shanta Apte). Saudamini frees the ship’s slaves and incites them to fight for freedom. This opening sequence sets up two central points of conflict: the dangerous closeness between inquilaab (enabling revolution) and khudgarzi, badla, and zulm (destructive selfishness, revenge, and atrocity), and the moral, social, and filial price one should be willing to pay for independence (azaadi).

Azaadi is a polyvalent signifier in the film, and characters use it while talking about the freeing of slaves from their masters, the liberation of women from men, and the struggle against social recidivism. In its time, the word necessarily connoted India’s freedom from colonial rule, so that all the struggles portrayed in the film become associated with the new nation’s agenda. As an aside, Indian film texts display as much of a bravura performance around the term independence (which translates into azaadi in Urdu and swatantrata in Hindi), as British regulatory documents demonstrate with the term empire. The songbook of the popular Hindi romance film Bandhan, for instance, opens with the following lines. “Swantantrata par manushya jaan de deta hai. Lekin ek aisa ‘bandhan’ hai jispar pranimatra janma bhar ki azaadi haste haste nyojhaavar kar deta hai . . . vah hai prem ka bandhan!” [Independence is something man will die for. But there is one “bond” for which humans abandon a lifetime of freedom with a laugh . . . the bond of love!].

32. Queen Saudamini scorns men and is seen here brutalizing Durjaya in Amar Jyoti. Courtesy NFAI.
Colonial Indian films inserted references to independence on all possible occasions.

With its slippage around the term azaadi, Amar Jyoti equates political freedom with women’s independence from patriarchy, but the fluidity of the comparison raises formal problems. The film cannot, with any consistency, develop its romantic subplot while maintaining its central protagonist’s rigid adherence to a woman’s independence from men. Accordingly, Saudamini’s dedication to sexual, social, and political freedom is given a psychological motivation, closely related to her gender identity. Saudamini, it is revealed, was once desirous of being an adarsh nari and an adarsh mata (an ideal woman and an ideal mother) until the reigning rani (queen) separated her from her son. Saudamini’s enmity with the rani is not developed in much detail, but it suggests that her rhetoric of independence is tainted by a personal desire for vengeance. Her message of sexual and social liberation, though not invalidated by this embitterment, is made fallible by it. Equally, however, the film may be read as an imaginary trajectory through which authoritarian hierarchies (of a patriarchal and imperial state) as well as rigidly individualistic philosophies (of the pirate queen) are purged in favor of an egalitarian and humane future, actualized by the film’s final male-female dyad of Nandini and Sudhir. The couple brings compassion and romance to the life of an outlaw while holding forth the promise that future generations will inherit a radical politics.

The film’s plot follows its two central female characters, Saudamini and Nandini. Saudamini captures Princess Nandini to aggrieve the rani (Nandini’s mother), and convinces Nandini to join the battle for her sex (referred to as jati, or caste, as in aurat jat, or the caste of womanhood). Nandini’s union with Saudamini’s cause, depicted in a sequence in which the two women embrace each other in solidarity, brings together various charged dialogues running through the film about gender inequities that make slaves even of queens. But Nandini’s decision to join Saudamini poses an immediate obstacle to her love for the shepherd Sudhir, who in an ironic plot twist is revealed to be Saudamini’s long lost son. Now Saudamini’s maternal love becomes a central issue in the film’s romantic plot, because she must choose between her brand of separatist feminism and her son’s happiness. Her beliefs appear to weaken in the face of her maternal instincts.

In reading the extracinematic public image of the actress Durga Khote (who plays Saudamini), Neepa Majumdar argues that Khote’s educated, upper-caste, and overtly reformist social commitments permeate her screen
persona and explain her progressive screen roles. Majumdar further proposes that the recuperation of an idealized notion of Indian motherhood subverts "Amar Jyoti"’s potentially radical message, by revealing “Saudamini’s renunciation of ‘womanly’ qualities, such as romantic love, motherhood, and domesticity, to be an unnatural distortion of her true feelings.” Arguably, however, the film’s stylized mise-en-scène, its theatrical dialogues, and the demonstrable influence of expressionist and baroque techniques on its visual imagery exceed the psychologically rendered realist, narrative containment of characters, suggesting significant artistic disturbance around the figure of a liberated woman.

The film’s resolution does not dull its structuring conflict between a woman’s desire for freedom versus her urges for romantic love (between Nandini and Sudhir) or maternal love (of Saudamini for Sudhir), both of which sentiments irredeemably embed these independent women into gendered social functions. Through the registers of visual and verbal excesses, the film offers what Miriam Hansen in a comparable context has called “a sensory-reflexive horizon for the contradictory experience of modernity,” particularly in regard to its implications for women. Too nebulous to be an outright critique of traditional constructions of femininity and maternity, the film’s hybrid visual and performative style nevertheless presents multiple and mutually incompatible perspectives on womanhood.

Discussing early Shanghai cinema, Hansen proposes that it “represents a distinct brand of vernacular modernism, one that evolved in a complex relation to American—and other foreign—models while drawing on and transforming Chinese traditions in theater, literature, graphic and print culture, both modernist and popular.” Actress Durga Khote’s persona and performance in "Amar Jyoti," and director Shantaram’s work during the 1930s navigated similar straits between the popular and avant-garde cultures in India, affecting their approach to cinema and their rendition of gender roles.

In talking about her relationship to films, Khote makes the incredible pronouncement that in the early days of cinema, “not many saw films for the reason that viewing films spoils the eye-sight.” The actress claims to have seen “only one movie and that was Maharashtra film company’s Karna” on the urging of classical singer Bal Gandharva, because there was “no place for glamour and show business” in this “devotional film.” Her avowed resistance to the medium does not prevent her from celebrating the fact that V. Damle and S. Fattelal (who formed Prabhat Studios with Shantaram in 1929) took photographs of film rehearsals and gave her, in her words, an “ocular dem-
onstration of the do’s and don’ts for an artiste.” So while the actress emphasizes cinema’s visual ability to reinterpret the dramatic crafts, she also stresses cinema’s association with the arts and its possible uses for social uplift by contrasting the enduring relevance of Karna’s moral message to the ephemera of films in general.

One may impute that the actress is mitigating the medium’s potential disreputability, which derives from its status as a commercial and modern profession rather than an élite avocation. Her response also starkly reveals cinema’s threat to the traditional separation between art and the public sphere, and its ability to create a new constellation of social relations by drawing members of different classes, castes, and genders into a shared work space and viewing site. As noted by Majumdar, Khote did not fit the typical profile of a film actress, given her elevated caste and educational status. In fact, her response personifies the social anxieties provoked by the medium as commodified culture. In *Amar Jyoti* Khote essays her role to reflect this ambivalence toward the medium. On the one hand, Khote’s deviations from the popular Sangeet Natak images of femininity dominant in Indian filmmaking may be read as her resistance to the medium’s massification. But the actress’s high-minded interpretation of Saudamini as an uncompromising figure who makes public declamations of female power differs from her more classically realist renditions of the character’s maternal love. Because other primary characters are unaware of Saudamini’s maternal anguish, the camera registers her dilemmas in secret complicity with the audience, exploiting the medium’s ability to convey an “ocular” intimacy between actor and viewer through close attention to detail.

Khote’s shifting performance as Saudamini—which ranges from registering emotions with minute facial expressions to preaching female independence in declamatory style—communicate her sense of cinema as a private, individualized mode of mediated address as well as a theatrical form aimed at vast audiences and infused with a higher purpose. Shantaram’s dramatic and visual rendition of Saudamini through different stylistic modes bespeaks a similarly complex attitude toward cinema’s modernity. The costume-drama aspect of the film pulls toward cinema’s mass-audience base drawn from popular theater, even as its deliberate references to international art cinema establishes the film’s high cultural status. Shantaram’s film integrates these dual impulses.

Shantaram Rajaram Vankudre trained under Baburao Painter. Unlike Khote, the director was a cinephile who drew on local as well as Hollywood
and European modes of representation in *Amar Jyoti* and *Amritmanthan*. In these films, the style of acting Shantaram learned at Gandharva Natak Mandali is combined with sequences of naturalistic acting; ornate backdrops reminiscent of the fantasies staged on Parsi theater coexist with spare expressionist sets and lighting; and symbolic abstractions exploit cinema’s ability to visually manipulate the image in clear variation from the seamless editing of the film’s narrative sequences. (According to his son, Shantaram was the first Indian filmmaker to use a telephoto lens, in *Amritmanthan*.) The director takes myths as a representational form familiar to Indian film audiences but endows them with an aestheticism by manipulating the camera, creating experimental impressionistic and subjective shots, and incorporating techniques from European art films critically acclaimed in India. The function of such stylistic hybridity may be best explained through a contrasting example.

Examining the uses of myth in Prabhat Studios films on Hindu saints, Geeta Kapur argues that the pictorial conventions of *Sant Tukaram* (Damle and Fattelal, 1936) “give its imagery an iconic aspect, taking iconic to mean an image into which symbolic meanings converge and in which moreover they achieve stasis.” Through a series of deft connections, Kapur links the iconicity endowed by the film to the figure of Tukaram (played with great success by Vishnupant Pagnis) with the frontal and idealized compositional conventions of pre-Mughal and Mughal miniatures, Raja Ravi Verma’s paintings, and Phalke’s mythological films. Though “religious iconicity is mediated to secular effect in the filmic process” in *Sant Tukaram*, what remains constant in this relay of influence from Ravi Verma paintings to Damle and Fattelal films, according to Kapur, is an extension of iconic significance to the indexical sign in a manner culturally specific to colonial India. The actor (or *patra* in Hindi; literally, “vessel”) “is at once deity and man; he is a pair of signs—the iconic and indexical,” understanding the two terms in the Piercian sense. Thus as an index, the representation of Tukaram has a manifest connection to reality (like a thumbprint to a thumb, or the screen image of Tukaram to the actor Pagnis), and as an icon, the sign has symbolic meanings for a culture (as Tukaram’s image emblematizes sainthood).

Shantaram’s stylistic hybridity can now be summed up as follows. The transferable signification that Kapur posits between actor and the (indexical) image as well as (iconic) sign in *Sant Tukaram* cannot be extended to Shantaram’s Prabhat Studios films. In *Amar Jyoti* and *Amritmanthan*, images and sequences become iconic through dense and allusive references to mythic texts. Their tangential commentary on the film breaks a potential stasis of
meaning and disrupts the commutation of significance between referent, index, and icon. Shantaram’s films convey a formalist opacity rather than a transfer of meaning between icon and image, suggesting that there was no single model for the use of myths in colonial film in this respect. For instance, Amritmanthan twice transports the audience into mythic sequences that depict the masculine Lord Vishnu transformed into the feminine seductress Mohini. As Mohini, Vishnu dupes the asuras (demons) into giving the devas (gods) the nectar of immortality. This mythic story about churning the ocean to yield nectar (literally “amritmanthan”) is first triggered by the words of the evil priest Rajguru, and later by an ally to the good queen. Rajguru uses the myth to illustrate the necessarily arduous road to his victory, while the queen’s ally beckons the myth to instruct the queen on the virtues of deception, because “kapati ke saath kapat karne mein koi paap nahin hai” [there is no sin in deceiving the deceivers]. The sequences are thus embedded in the narrative at the service of opposing characters, which effectively transforms the represented gods into polysemous icons whose meanings are mobilized equally by good and evil narrative forces. These weakened codes of meaning assignation in integrating mythic and realist sequences reveals the film’s mobilization of diverse appeals, which are only contingently stabilized within the film’s symbolic domain. The same may be said of the symbolism in Amar Jyoti. Under Shantaram’s direction, Khote’s Saudamini vociferously attacks society for the duration of the film and performs her protest in exaggerated terms. Cinematically, low-key lighting and iterative shots of waves crashing against rocks thematize the clash between Saudamini and patriarchy, giving the allegorically represented conflict enhanced visual gravity. Like the waves, Saudamini vows to never give up her fight against the rigidly rocklike dictates of an unjust society (“anyayi samaj ke mazboot patharon se”). On seeing her resolve, her male companion Shekhar remarks on the fearsome nature of the battle between the waves and the rocks, similarly speaking in metaphors (“kitni bhayanak jang chhidi hai dono mein!”). The cumulative visual and rhetorical accretion of the film’s allegorical meaning prevents Saudamini’s eventual departure from the life of piracy, and the film’s narrative, from becoming a complete abandonment of her feminist rebellion.

Like the historicals discussed earlier, Amar Jyoti (similar to Amritmanthan) shows its characters deliberating over the best form of governance. Unlike realist films that inherit the nation’s pedagogical function in their form, conflicts of political modernity are equivocated through declamatory dialogues. As Saudamini departs, Shekhar tells her that waves soften rocks. Symbolic
shots of waves and rocks return, and disembodied lamps again light each other in an echo of the film’s opening. Admittedly, the film’s conclusion combines this metaphoric message of social change with a melodramatic appeal to the social icon of a sacrificial mother when Saudamini withdraws without revealing her maternal identity to her son, Sudhir. In this, Saudamini’s narrative function appeases the social demand for a woman to identify with maternal emotions. But iterative spectacles that signify Saudamini’s unassimilated retreat from society counteract the narrative’s traditional valuation of sacrificial maternity.

In *Amritmanthan* and *Amar Jyoti* the uneven coexistence of the mythic/allegorical and narrative/realist sequences exposes the film’s link to two distinct kinds of “cultural manifestations of mass-produced, mass-mediated, and mass-consumed modernity.”  

Mythic sequences counteract fears of cinema as a purely Western technology by mobilizing populism, and immortalizing a transient commercial medium by ascending to the level of eternal time and truths; narrative sequences endow the medium with a secular and bourgeois respectability. The film’s narrativity flatters the viewer by expecting complicity and comprehension of a cinematic vocabulary shared with commercial Hollywood films and Indian socials. At the same time, however, my distinction between mythic and realist narrative sequences is at risk of creating a false dichotomy between two related manipulations of the cinematic medium. If myth and symbolism combat anxieties of the medium’s ephemeral, consumable nature with a fantasy of timelessness, the realist narrative evades the same fear by hubristically imposing its own temporality. For this reason, they are best seen as a two-headed response to cinematic modernity.

Additionally, both mythic and narrative modes are connected because Shantaram anoints both kinds of sequences with stylized allusions to European films, staging an imaginary dialogue between his commercial film and the inaccessible circuit of international art cinema. Shantaram’s film style occasionally displays a studied cosmopolitanism rather than an organic or unconscious modernism. To the extent that film aesthetics can function as an index of what was under negotiation during this historical period, Shantaram’s varied address demonstrates not only his “vernacularization,” as Hansen puts it, of cinematic modernity but also his studied deliberation over international film style. The distinction between colonial Indian cinema’s “vernacular modernism” (as Indian filmmakers reconfigured cinema through local idioms of modernization) and a more modular modernism is essential
to an exploration of Shantaram’s conscious or selective use of expressionist techniques, embedded in his films almost as quotations.

Shantaram formed Prabhat Studios with Damle and Fattelal, leaving Prabhat in 1942 to create Rajkamal Kalamandir. In 1933, while visiting Germany to print Sairandhri in color, Shantaram had an opportunity to view several expressionist and kammerspiel films. His subsequent films show an importation of European modernist techniques as his films creatively incorporate their styles. German expressionist techniques—chiaroscuro lighting and angular, distorted sets to convey psychic complexity—serve to mark Amritmanthan’s artistic status within India, because they shield the films from criticisms aimed at popular Indian and Hollywood films of the 1930s.

Samik Bandyopadhyay summarizes comments from Indian film journals of the period, noting, “Both Filmland and filmindia in the thirties were fighting a lost battle against what they considered the ‘Bombay brand picture with all action but no psychology.’... Prabhansu Gupta (Filmland, 31 January 1931) upheld Murnau, Stroheim, and Lubitsch as models, ‘as sworn allies of emotional pictures . . . not panoramic and advocates of motion as the Yankee directors are,‘ and Niranjan Pal held up the ‘technique’ of German cinema, and ‘art and life’ of Russian cinema against the ‘well made, sophisticated film plays to tickle our fancies—sugary, peppery, undress spectacles and so called sex-dramas’ churned out by Hollywood.” Indian films that wished to identify with a more elevated form than the commercial Hollywood product self-consciously mobilized antithetical references to German and Soviet cinema. Though Rajadhyaksha and Willemen note that Shantaram tried to break into the European market in the 1940s (his 1943 Hindi-language film Shakuntala was made with an eye toward export), in the 1930s he was embittered by the racism he encountered in Germany. His trip abroad, invigorating to his sense of cinema’s possibilities, was also one on which he suffered “the worst humiliation of his life.” His use of expressionist techniques was less a means of gaining the acceptance of international distributors and audiences than a self-conscious modernist rewriting of Indian cinema (visible later in Guru Dutt’s films, particularly in the choreography of musical sequences).

The occasional modularity or importation of this modernism does not convey the style’s foreignness to Indian cinema but rather the Indian film director’s marked display of a cosmopolitan knowledge of the cinematic form. Techniques of European modernist films were utilized to specific ends within the colonial Indian context, revealing something of the style’s significance to
its application and something of the context’s affinity to an imported style. In the next section, I examine specific textual occasions for such stylization to draw broad conclusions about its historical significance.

Multiple Modernisms

Amritmanthan tells the story of a mythical kingdom where the reformist King Krantiverma (Varde) opposes his powerful head priest, Rajguru (Chandramohan). Rajguru supports human and animal sacrifice (nar bali and pashu bali), and decides that the modern reformist king’s obstructions to this form of worship must cease. With an otherworldly control over his people, Rajguru conducts a ritual to elect the king’s killer in the presence of the fearsome idol of Goddess Chandika. Yashodharma (Kulkarni) is elected to murder the king, and for his dark deed, he dies by the sword of the king’s guards. With the king murdered, Rajguru exercises authoritarian control over the kingdom and its princess, who is now crowned Queen Mohini (Nalini Tarkhad). Matters are eventually righted through the intervention of Madhavgupt (Suresh Babu), the orphaned son of ill-fated killer Yashodharma. Madhavgupt woos Queen Mohini and reveals to her the treachery of her head priest. Together, they regain her kingdom after Rajguru’s death.

Admi, on the other hand, is a contemporary social and deals with the relationship between the prostitute Kesar (Shanta Hublikar) and the policeman Moti (Shahu Modak). Alleged by some to be loosely adapted from MGM’s Waterloo Bridge (Whale, 1931), Admi depicts the social stigma against prostitutes that prevents Moti from marrying Kesar. Kesar’s humor, courage, and defiance in pursuing the relationship are sympathetically portrayed, but she is unable to escape her past and eventually murders her extortionist pimp. As she goes to prison, Kesar leaves a life-affirming message for the suicidal Moti, telling him not to give up the world for her love.

Despite genre differences between the two films, there is an overlap in artistic vision that I link not only to the director’s predisposition but also to the realm of what appeared possible within the formative language of commercial cinema during the 1930s. Though Amritmanthan is a mythological film and Admi is a social, both incorporate expressionist and surreal techniques to construct a didactic message for the new nation by conveying an ineffable horror of religious and social recidivism. Admi combines a kammerspiel-film aesthetic in its lighting and settings with naturalistic acting and elements of narrative realism. Specifically, Moti and Kesar’s encounters, Kesar’s desire
for a respectable life, Moti’s desire for Kesar, and Kesar’s discomfort at her own improbable fantasies of social acceptance are marked by asymmetrical visual compositions and chiaroscuro lighting. While the acting is always understated and reflects the psychological motivation of the characters, the mise-en-scène far exceeds the film’s situational realism, as is immediately evident in the film’s stylized opening sequence.

A man’s and a woman’s feet walk rapidly over a stony wilderness, and the film’s credits stand out in relief on the rocks. (The setting prefigures the final scene where Moti runs after Kesar following her murder of the extortionist.) These shots are immediately mimicked in the first narrative sequence in which a canted camera follows feet walking through a gambling den, lit with high-contrast, low-key lighting. The men are revealed to be a raiding police force. Officer Moti’s flashlight catches the prostitute Kesar in a perfect spotlight, framed as if in a tableau or a portrait shot. Despite his better judgment, he shields her with his uniform and lets her pass unnoticed by his fellow officers.

The film proceeds to depict a romance between the male agent of law and the female transgressor with a combination of psychological realism and stylization. Interestingly, despite its hybrid style, the film underscores a deeper binary between aesthetic artificiality and aesthetic authenticity by consistently presenting its own polymorphous style as best suited to the cinematic medium and to cinema’s social function. Indeed, the film can be understood as a visual essay on the formal and social inefficacy of competing Indian film styles. The most explicit commentary on alternative directorial and studio styles occurs when Kesar and Moti stumble on a film shoot. This shoot replicates a famous song sequence (“Main ban ki chidiya”) from Himansu Rai’s then recent Bombay Talkies production Admi (a.k.a. The Untouchable Girl) (Osten, 1936). The protagonists of Admi openly parody the shooting for its fakeness. In the film-within-the-film, the song of a koel (cuckoo bird) is revealed as the product of an elaborate orchestra, and we see that the lead actress wears a Western dress underneath her sari. In this lampooned version of Admi the original film’s popular romantic song is transformed into a song with inane, repetitious lyrics: “Premi prem nagar mein jaayen” [lovers go to love city]; “Premi prem ki bansi bajayen” [lovers play a love-flute]. Kesar and Moti watch the shooting and parody the song’s syrupy words with their own mock lyrics about eating love’s bread from love’s stove smeared with some love chutney.

This was presumably an inside joke by Prabhat’s classically trained com-
poser Master Krishnarao (who “helped shaped Bal Gandharva’s enormously influential populist versions of North Indian classical music”) at the expense of Bombay Talkies’ composer Saraswati Devi (originally Khursheed Mankershah Minocher-Homji) whose songs succeeded “because of their nursery rhyme simplicity.” Compared to Shantaram’s socially didactic dialogues as well, Rai’s dialogues had a digestible uncomplicatedness, apparently related to Rai and his associate Niranjan Pal’s difficulty with the Hindi language. According to Colin Pal (Niranjan Pal’s son), “Both Bengalis who understood precious little Hindi stipulated that no dialogue would be passed unless they could follow it. J. S. Kashyap [dialogue writer and lyricist] would literally tear his hair in trying to make his dialogue simple enough.” In addition to ridiculing Bombay Talkies for pandering to the public’s taste for easy listening, Admi dismisses Acchut Kanya’s treatment of love as unrealistic. The Rai-Osten film depicts a fatal romance between Pratap (Ashok Kumar) and Kasturi (Devika Rani), an untouchable woman, through narrative and visual strategies that are no less complex than Shantaram’s. Since Acchut Kanya holds thematic and stylistic relevance to Admi’s depiction of a prostitute who similarly faces social disenfranchisement and ostracism, Shantaram’s parody can be read as a critique of other filmic treatments of social problems in contemporary India.

Himansu Rai, founder of the studio that produced Achhut Kanya, and his wife Devika Rani who plays the film’s lead, both acquired work experience in the media industries of Germany and Britain. The foundations of Rai’s film career were international: he started acting when he was in a theater group in London; his first film The Light of Asia (a.k.a. Prem Sanyas and Die Leuchte Asiens) was directed by the German Franz Osten and co-produced by Osten’s brother, Peter Ostermayer. This debut film opened in Berlin, Brussels, Budapest, Genoa, Venice, and Vienna in 1925. Rai’s silent films Prapancha Pash (a.k.a. The Throw of Dice and Schicksalswürfel, 1928–1929) and Shiraz (a.k.a. Das Grabmal einer grossen Liebe, 1928) were pre-sold to UFA and British Instructional films. Karma (1933), Rai’s first talkie, was made in English and exhibited to an international audience before the Hindi version was brought to India. Though Rai established Bombay Talkies in 1934 to target the Indian market after the Nazi government overtook Germany’s film-production facilities, the orientalism of previous Osten-Rai collaborations gave license to criticisms that their films had a foreign sensibility.

The rustic settings of Bombay Talkies films like Acchut Kanya, Janmabhoomi (1936), and Bandhan (1940) do betray a studio-based and “Anglicized fantasy
of an Indian village,” which could just as well be described as an urban Indian fantasy of an idyllic and undeveloped rural India.\textsuperscript{82} In this sense, Bombay Talkies’ films arguably fit into a kind of bourgeois realism that has been identified in post-independence Indian films. \textit{Achut Kanya} nevertheless shares an affinity with \textit{Admi} in its integration of modernist stylization with realism and didacticism. Shantaram’s reduction of \textit{Achut Kanya} to a placeholder for ineffective depictions of India’s social problems becomes noteworthy in this context. Both \textit{Admi} and \textit{Achut Kanya} criticize ossified social beliefs and reveal an awareness and engagement of international film styles, but \textit{Admi} alone insists that its vision is more authentic. \textit{Admi}’s elements of symbolism, fantasy, and expressionist sets and lighting are integrated into the film despite their stylistic variance from the film’s realism, in order to pass judgment on competing “inauthentic” representations. In this sense, the film is a self-conscious attempt to define a style that is presented as socially responsible, aesthetically cosmopolitan, nationally appealing, and \textit{truer} than other film styles.

Shanta Hublikar’s famous song as Kesar reflects \textit{Admi}’s self-aware articulation of a national address. Becoming a metonym of an Indian film reaching out to a mass national base, Kesar sings “Kis Liye Kal ki Baat” [Why Talk of Tomorrow] in six Indian languages to a clientele of Indian men from different regions. She entertains a Bengali, a Maharashtrian, a Punjabi, a Gujarati, a Tamilian, and a Muslim (of note, only the Muslim character is identified by religion rather than region), singing a verse adapted to their regional musical styles while wearing their characteristic headdresses. The intimate address of the singer who pokes gentle fun at her audience by imitating them and integrating their local inflections into her song meshes with the symbolism of a film seeking a national template for entertainment, smartly subsuming regional specificities under its own versatility.

As a counterpoint to this national fluency, Shantaram’s use of expressionist techniques may be read as his attempt to engage a cosmopolitanism in addition to a regionalism, using a film language culturally coded as European to formulate a cinematic idiom that simultaneously marks itself as nationally authentic.\textsuperscript{83} The combined forces of \textit{Admi}’s claims to social authenticity and its modular expressionism are brought to bear on the film’s content. In scrutinizing this film’s style in relation to its depiction of Kesar in particular, I find that expressionist citations appear whenever the film thematically hints at the oppressiveness of a social order otherwise normalized through psychological and narrative realism.
Kesar is a hooker with a heart of gold. But rather than being a martyr who is unquestioningly devoted to the male protagonist (the stock prostitute figure of several Indian films from Devdas [Hindi/Bengali, Barua, 1935] to Muqaddar ka Sikandar [Hindi, Mehra, 1978]), Kesar is a cynical, quick-witted, and sharp-tongued woman who challenges Moti to marry her. For most of the film, Moti is incapable of such courage and cannot act on his self-righteous desire to protect Kesar from her profession. While most of the visually remarkable sequences that utilize dramatic low-key lighting are in public arenas of disrepute (such as the gambling den and the prostitute’s home), the more poignant ones take place in domestic settings. As Moti wakes up to his mother’s song in the morning and faces his home’s prayer area, for instance, he is cast in deep shadows. Without reading meaning as acontextually embedded in form, arguably the use of high contrasts and excessive shadows for otherwise innocuous occasions prefigures the disruption of domestic space, as when Kesar meets Moti’s religious mother for the first time. It throws a lattice of unease and doubt on the film’s depictions of normalcy in social and interpersonal relationships.

If in Sirkian melodramas color is almost a live entity showing the “inner violence” of characters, here lighting takes on an extranarrative function to show the inner violence of society.84 The lighting and dialogue bring a dark
presentiment of desires that lie in conflict with social expectations. They are used as cues that a prostitute cannot integrate into respectable society despite the fact that this society is composed of well-intentioned people like Moti, Moti’s mother, his sister, and uncle. With its stylization, the film provides intimations of the enormity of the obstacles facing socially subversive desires and the hypocrisies underlying foundational social conventions like matrimony. With its humanism, on the other hand, the film articulates sympathy for this same society and its conventions, as dramatized by the other prominent couple in the film: not passionate star-crossed lovers but Moti’s aged and affectionately squabbling neighbors, whom everyone treats as a model of compatibility. Through comic banter and realist depictions of domesticity, the film portrays a society of banal normalcy with sympathy. The stylization provides a counterpoint of tragic overtones, observing the cruelty of unwittingly exclusionary social normalcy.

At the film’s conclusion, Admi’s strong central female character does not commit suicide (as happens in the MGM equivalent), but gives herself up to the police after murdering her pimp. Kesar’s words, delivered to Moti by her young ward Manu, echo at the film’s conclusion. “Behen ne kaha hai, prem ke liya duniha na chhodna” [Sister says, don’t abandon this world for her love]. Filmindia editor Baburao Patel assessed MGM’s Waterloo Bridge as “a romance pure and simple” that “makes light of hunger, poverty and unemployment” with “no social significance” in comparison to Admi, “perhaps the most vivid document of human emotions. Its bedrock is the regeneration of lost souls.”

Despite such celebrations of its social realism, Admi’s less-interrogated use of stylization indicates that we cannot read the film as purely edifying and reformist. Unlike the film’s realist segments, Admi’s expressionist sequences convey their meaning to the audience not by way of acting, dialogue, or narrative resolutions but through alterations to the mise-en-scène. These shots mark an explicit metatextual commentary by unconventional shot distances and a puncturing stillness of the realist narrative’s flow to produce deliberately uncanny effects.

In Admi these effects are linked to the presence of the prostitute Kesar and to expressions of her transgressive desire. In Amritmanthan they accompany the dictatorial propagator of human and animal sacrifice, Rajguru. With a Langian Dr. Mabusa-like presence, Rajguru controls his people through an irrational mysticism that is cinematically conveyed by allusions to his powerful presence. His silently gesturing eyes fill the screen just before hideous acts of violence and betrayal; shapes of cowering people are reflected in those mag-
nified shots of his eyes; his voice is heard from off-screen spaces; and we often sense him only as a looming shadow. These sequences are more frequent and flamboyant than in Admi but are similar in pictorial status as they stand out in relief against sequences internally marked as realist within the remainder of the film.87

Kesar and Rajguru are radically different characters: one is female, the other male; one is shunned thoughtlessly, the other obeyed blindly; one can find acceptance only under the condition of social reform, the other is resistant to social and religious change. But both are similar in provoking a social crisis. Their transgressions lie in wanting acceptance within communities that are either too conservative to transform (in Kesar’s case) or too weak to resist traditional dogma (as with Rajguru). They are both powerful entities who demonstrate the severe shortcomings of Indian society and cannot be forgotten despite their narrative evacuation. If Kesar’s words resonate at the end of Admi, Rajguru’s death in Amritmanthan is unforgottably gruesome. Confronted with defeat by the reformist faction of society, Rajguru cuts off his own head, and his decapitated body places the head reverentially at the feet of Goddess Chandika. On seeing this horrible sight, the male lead Madhavgupt calls him “rivazon ka saccha ghulam” [a true slave to ritual].

Though representing directly opposing social modalities, Kesar and Raj-
guru are relentlessly committed to their beliefs. Their physical elimination from the plot is necessary because they raise uncomfortable questions about the society from which their stories emerge, a society that insists on the disreputability of a woman of the marketplace and the respectability of a God-man. Kesar and Raiguru also provoke the film’s moments of extreme stylization. The characters are quite literally excessive in the sense that they are delivered to us through conventions that the discourse of contemporary Indian film criticism identified with international art cinema. Their stylization marks the unique textual status of specific themes by going beyond the realm of familiar visual tropes.

Shantaram’s importation of a style that would have been coded as hyper-aesthetic in its time was more than an auteur’s affectation. It qualitatively endowed Kesar and Raiguru with a power extraneous to the narrative, because they represent elements inassimilable within their stories. In other words, the competing force fields of the resulting hybrid aesthetics in Amritmanthan and Admi point to a fundamental fault line in colonial Indian society. The crisis in both films is generated by the irreconcilables of a historical period in which India’s nationalism depended simultaneously on a liberal discourse of social emancipation (as in the case of Kesar’s ideals) and of traditionalism (represented negatively in Rajguru, but positively through the mother and the old couple in Admi and the reformist religion of the good king in Amritmanthan). Historically, neither anticolonial position could represent or produce unanimous political agitation against imperialism on its own terms. The tragic political failure to reconcile disparate nationalist demands are chronicled in the bloody partition of India and Pakistan, and in the continuing history of politically abetted communal, sectarian, and separatist movements in the region. Colonial films aiming for a national audience followed the commercial injunction to construct a compromise between nationalism’s internal dissents because their success depended on appeasing (producing) diverse constituencies of film viewership. Films became figurations of the internal polarizations of India’s nationalist discourse when they attempted to reach for multiple and potentially contradictory nationalist appeals to create a cinematic vision. Shantaram’s colonial films begin to convey the explosive dialectics of an emerging India as soon as he combines the arguments of bourgeois liberalism with the sentimental and visual appeals of a populist culturalism, not only through his characters and themes but also in his modernist reworkings of the mythic and fable form. The films are so many artistic solutions to
the problem of crafting a common set of values and visions not organically shared by a people who find that they have to share a nation-state.

The dominant form of bourgeois nationalism that defined itself in opposition to imperialism, best represented by the Indian National Congress Party, developed alongside regional-, caste-, and linguistically based nationalisms. A vivid example of this is the Self-Respect Movement and the Dravidian Movement in South India, which opposed Hindu Brahmanism and the emerging nation's northern Hindi hegemony while supporting Tamil regional and linguistic separatism, rationalism, and social justice for the backward classes. Characterizing this historical moment solely by its anticolonial nationalism and seeking the presence of that unifying mode within colonial films is a self-fulfilling exercise. The multiple self-determining agendas unleashed by a modern nationalism could not be solved within the framework of a nation-state, though nationalist discourses labored to produce this elusive, unifying address. Films from different linguistic regions of India that aspired to reach a national audience similarly confronted the problem of appealing to a people who did not ascribe to one national imaginary. Commercial films in the social genre (like Admi) found their solution in adopting the moralizing tone of social instruction. Myths and historicals (like Amritmanthan and Diler Jigar) appealed to the idea of a shared pre-modern past while distinguishing evil (feudally reactionary) lords from reformist (feudally enlightened) monarchs. In different ways, each genre provided a template for the uneven assimilation of modernity within the colony. Melodramatic socials were to become independent India’s dominant cinematic form for manufacturing an imaginary civic society. But in the suppressed (unconscious and conscious, vernacular and modular) modernisms of colonial films lay a more troubled articulation of a national identity than we may have allowed for in our readings.

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Nationalist struggles against colonialism and conflicts internal to nationalism were part of the Indian film industry’s formative reality and part of the Indian filmmaker’s environment. Consider two recollections from the 1930s. Anil Biswas, a composer who defined the first three decades of Indian film music and trained singers like Mukesh, Talat Mehmood, and Lata writes about his revolutionary years in Barisal, later part of east Pakistan. As a member of the revolutionary nationalist party in the early 1930s, Biswas expressed
violent protest against imperial rule by making and throwing explosives. A friend speaks of going to jail with Biswas and singing anti-British Bengali songs that he had composed. After years of being imprisoned and struggling for subsistence wages, on his release, Biswas finally found work in the new industry of motion pictures. He was already a familiar name to Indian filmgoers by 1943, when he composed music for Gyan Mukherjee’s Kismet. His old political alliances resonate in the rousing nationalist chorus of the film’s popular song, “Duar Hato Ay Duniyavallon, Hindustan Hamara Hai” (these alliterative lyrics embrace the essence of the “Quit India” anthem and can be somewhat inadequately translated as “Leave, Get Away, People of the World. India is Ours”). Silent- and early-sound-film producer J. B. H. Wadia did not share Biswas’s revolutionary zeal, but he did support the Indian National Congress. His recollections of sitting in Kohinoor Studios trying to get a break in the film industry involve memories of heated debates on the comparative merits of British imperialists against other European colonizers.

Imagining Wadia’s casual conversations about imperialism in a film studio, which were probably preceded by other debates about comparative filmmaking techniques and the box-office performances of Hollywood and Indian films, makes one sense that distilling the nationalist agenda of a filmmaker’s politics or a film’s text barely captures this period. Anti-imperial nationalism was as ubiquitous as the daily newspaper; it defined, and was experienced through, the conditions of creating a commercially and nationally popular cinema. So, while it is possible to list instances when filmmakers took overtly anticolonial stances against the state (Shantaram, for instance, resigned as chief producer of the government’s Film Advisory Board in 1942, following Gandhi’s demand that the British quit India), such an enumeration does not convey the everyday struggle of turning a profit in a new industry or of inventing a viable popular cinema under colonial conditions. To grasp this aspect, I have discussed visual and narrative formations (of modernism and romance) in two prominent colonial film genres (the myth and the historical), because aesthetics and genre offer concrete ways to understand the multiple industrial agendas and complex political ambitions that shaped colonial films.

Colonial Indian cinema was a survivalist cinema. The unstable conditions of a new industry and the lack of state assistance meant that pioneering filmmakers like Phalke and Painter ended their lives in dire debt, and that aspiring filmmakers had to think of innovative ways to succeed. Films of the 1930s that aimed to define a domestically competitive Indian cinema, escape state
censure, and address larger constituencies of Indian audiences were fascinated-ingly ambitious products serving many ends, as was reflected in their stylistic hybridity. To cultivate a cross-class domestic audience for Indian films, colonial filmmakers broadened their audience base by incorporating nationalist themes with appeals from Hollywood’s popular spectacle-oriented stunt and action films. They also refunctioned aspects of Hollywood’s classical realist and European art cinema appreciated by elite Indian theatergoers and Indian film critics. Under the stern censorship of a colonial state, allusive anti-state messages were embedded in mythic and historical narratives that simultaneously inscribed an Indian cultural identity on a medium tainted by its association with imperial modernity and commercialism. Formally, then, colonial films were flexible commodities that registered through their heterogeneity competing international influences, domestic political repressions, experimentations with film style, and the diversity of their consumer bases.

If colonial cinema encountered India’s cultural modernity with experimentation and strategy, it confronted India’s political modernity with anxiety and excitement. At a time when the nation did not have a sovereign state, films offered different fictional resolutions for imagining an individual’s place in relation to their families, communities, and governing authorities in a future collective. Across colonial film genres, we find representations of individuals rebelling against corrupt authority (Amar Jyoti, Amritmanthan, Wahan, Neecha Nagar), envisioning a utopian future (Wahan, Neecha Nagar, Janma-bhoomi), or impeded by their community’s lack of foresight about such a future (Admi, Kunku, Chandidas, Acchut Kanya, Bandhan). Repeatedly, the energies of these narratives are consumed with problems posed by the community’s traditionally disenfranchised subjects, because narrative and visual equilibrium is conditional on their communal integration. If, on the one hand, resistance to imperialism was contingent on political inclusiveness and a new visualization/narrativization of marginalized subjects, their very inclusion revealed the potential for internal factionalization within the new collective, its narrative, and its vision.

Colonial Indian cinema’s varied stylistic imaginations of a new civil society reveal that threats of recidivism, internal decay, nativism, and communalism coexisted alongside an anticipation of a new nation. The Indian nation-state was as yet unrealized; it did not exert an official force to rationalize film form or to provoke systematic articulations of resistance. In the absence of the national entity in all but ideal terms, the competing demands on cinema—to envision a utopian state and a future society, to allusively
protest imperialism, to outdo Hollywood, to create Indian audiences, to invent a modern form of art and entertainment, and, quite simply, to survive—appear in amazing clarity. The aesthetics of British empire cinema and colonial Indian cinema were a product of such heterogeneous pressures placed by decolonization on two film industries, their personnel, their strategies, and their imaginations, all of which may be too easily foreclosed if we solely attend to the unifying functions of their national cinemas.