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'India on Film 1939-1947'

Richard Osborne

The names adopted by the opposing forces at the beginning of World War II have specific emphases. While Germany, Italy and Japan saw themselves as an *Axis* around which lesser countries would revolve, their opponents called themselves *Allies*, a name that had been used in some of the common defence pacts and military alliances signed by these countries before the War. Ideology was present in nomenclature, with the Allies selecting a group name that spoke of commonality and the collaborative nature of their enterprise. And yet the situation was not as straightforward as this terminology would have us believe. While sharing the ultimate goal of defeating the Axis powers, the Allies were not unified in their beliefs or in their levels of enthusiasm for the campaign. Moreover, in a war that marked 'the greatest and the ultimate "revival" of the British Empire', the Allies were far from unified in their beliefs about the benefits of British imperialism.¹ The campaign actually had the effect of highlighting differences among the countries. The Allies fought under the banners of 'freedom' and 'democracy', ideals that clashed with the realities of British imperial rule.²

In January 1942, shortly after America entered the War, President Franklin D. Roosevelt made his first use of the term 'United Nations' to describe the partners who were fighting the fascist countries, a name that again stressed the mutuality of the Allied response. The new alliance with the United States affected the relationship between Britain and its Empire. On the one hand, it could be argued that it helped to make this relationship more harmonious. Aware of anti-imperial feeling within the US, Britain became more mindful of the way in which its involvement with its

colonies was represented, and thus promoted the ideal of co-operative advancement.³ On the other hand, the wartime alliance with America helped to destabilise Britain's imperial authority. The war effort engendered greater US military and economic involvement with many of the countries of the British Empire.⁴ This involvement redoubled the United States' interest in colonial policy; it also affected the balance of power in the countries with whom they were engaged.

It is in relation to India that the complexities of the wartime Alliance are most evident. During the first half of the twentieth century India had become the most advanced of the Empire countries in terms of self-government and it had also been the most vocal in terms of opposition to British power. Despite this, the country had little choice regarding its wartime alliance with Britain. In September 1939, Lord Linlithgow, the Viceroy of India, had declared that because Britain was at war India was at war, a stance that was adopted without consulting any Indian politicians.⁵ Consequently, the leading Indian political party, the Indian National Congress (INC), resigned from government rather than support the War cause. Many Americans, including President Roosevelt, were sympathetic towards nationalist aspirations in India, thus deepening the need for Britain to resolve this situation.⁶ In 1942, Sir Stafford Cripps, a member of the British War Cabinet, was dispatched to India, where he made the promise of Dominion Status for the country on the basis that the INC provide support for the Allied campaign. The INC rejected his offer and instead embarked on the open rebellion of the 'Quit India' movement, demanding full independence from Britain. Mahatma Gandhi, who had aligned himself with the INC in 1936, was arrested, as was the entire INC working committee. Gandhi was not released until 1944, and then only due to his ill health. The majority of the INC's leadership remained imprisoned throughout the War.⁷ There was, nevertheless, also

support for the War within India. Indians volunteered at the rate of 50,000 a month (there was no conscription in the country). The Indian army grew from about 200,000 men in 1939, to 900,000 men by the end of 1941, and peaked at 2,600,000 men in 1945.⁸ India was also transformed economically. The country produced more wartime supplies than Australia, New Zealand and South Africa combined.⁹

Film policy was a subset of this complex and shifting political situation. Government institutions were formed to generate film propaganda. The political perspectives that they promoted were often 'allied', but they also differed. In Britain, the Ministry of Information (MoI) was formed as the department responsible for publicity and propaganda.¹⁰ Among its duties, the MoI sponsored wartime propaganda films, as well as monitoring the output of Britain's privately owned newsreel companies and military film production units.¹¹ Also part of the MoI's remit was filmic representations of the British Empire. In most Empire countries, the MoI assumed responsibility for the factual films that were destined for overseas audiences, but in India a more complicated situation evolved.¹² Here, the outbreak of War led to the introduction of the Film Advisory Board (FAB), which was later replaced by Information Films of India (IFI). These organisations were affiliated to the Government of India, and were responsible for producing films aimed at both domestic and overseas audiences. The MoI was closely involved, however: it part-funded some of the films and was responsible for their distribution in other Allied countries.

The Colonial Film Database houses a diverse range of films about India, which provide evidence of the differing Allied perspectives during the Second World War. In the following I devote separate sections to films made about the sub-continent by Indian and British companies, and a further section examines the ways in which

the commercial American film company, March of Time, addressed the history and current practices of British policy in India. While these films sometimes address issues directly, often it is their absences that indicate the divergent nature of the Allies beliefs. On other occasions there are unexpected emphases: praise is given where it would not normally expected to be due.

With the cessation of hostilities, relations between India and Britain were once again altered. In the final section of this chapter I turn to two films that were made about India during the period between the end of the War and the arrival of independence in 1947. These films reflect the new attitudes of this time, and they shed further light on the films made during the War. In one instance, quite literally so: the film reuses footage from earlier wartime productions to tell a story that has a new political aim. The reuse of film materials was a common practice throughout this period. Footage would be re-combined and provided with new commentaries. In the same way that there was only an apparent unity between the Allied partners, there is only an apparent unity between the sound and vision of film. The United Nations had differing ideals of freedom, and they reused their film materials to promote these differing ideals.

Endnotes

¹ Keith Jeffery, 'The Second World War', in *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume IV: The Twentieth Century*, ed. by Judith M. Brown and Wm. Roger Louis (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 306-28 (p. 306).

² Jeffery, 'The Second World War', p. 313.

³ A.J. Stockwell, 'Imperialism and Nationalism in South-East Asia', in *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume IV: The Twentieth Century*, ed. by Judith M.

Brown and Wm. Roger Louis (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 465-89 (p. 476).

⁴ Jeffery, 'The Second World War', p. 322.

⁵ Jeffery, 'The Second World War', p. 311.

⁶ B.D. Garga, *From Raj to Swaraj: The Non-fiction Film in India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2007), p. 62.

⁷ Judith M. Brown, *Modern India: The Origins of an Asian Democracy*, 2nd edn (Oxford: OUP, 1994), p. 324.

⁸ Ashley Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (Hambledon Continuum, 2006), p. 358.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ The Ministry of Information was constituted 4 September 1939, the day after Britain entered the War. The department had previously been in existence during the First World War.

¹¹ James Chapman, *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda, 1939-1945* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1998), p. 138; Gerald Sanger 'We Lived in the Presence of History: The Story of British Movietone News in the War Years', in *Yesterday's News: The British Cinema Newsreel Reader*, ed. by Luke McKernan (London: BUFVC, 2002), 164-70.

¹² Philip Woods, 'From Shaw to Shantaram', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, August 2001, 293-308 (p. 297).