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**Journeys in and Beyond the City: Cinema in Calcutta 1897 – 1939**

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Faculty of Media, Arts and Design

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**Journeys in and Beyond the City:  
Cinema in Calcutta 1897 - 1939**

**Ranita Chatterjee**

**PhD  
2011**

# **Journeys in and Beyond the City: Cinema in Calcutta 1897 - 1939**

**Ranita Chatterjee**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements of the University of Westminster  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is a historiography of early cinema in Calcutta and moves away from the received paradigm of ‘national’ cinema to consider the larger transnational framework within which to narrate histories of early cinema. It also positions the city as a critical frame from which early film historiography can be generated. The study maps out the emergence of the Calcutta film industry, from its beginnings in 1897 to the rise of the studios and its stabilisation by the 1930s. In the process the study challenges received film history to reveal a complex, multi-layered and robust film industry in Calcutta that emerged concurrently with Bombay – a narrative that has largely been written out of nationalist discourses of ‘Indian cinema’.

The thesis addresses a lacuna in the history of film in South Asia by shifting the focus to Calcutta, from Bombay; by moving away from the film text to focus on institutional history; and by moving from an interrogation of production histories to placing histories of film circulation at the centre of film historiography. This is the first enquiry based on studio records to discuss film history in India in this period. It accesses rare industry documents found in the archives of the Aurora Film Corporation, the oldest surviving film studio in India. The Aurora papers bring to light new evidence on the everyday workings of the film industry in the 1930s, including details of circulation practices and trans-regional networks that inextricably link the three key industries of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras in complex relationships. The Aurora papers also reveal details of transnational circulation amongst the Indian diaspora in the 1930s and broadens the canvas of enquiry into early South Asian cinema. Thereby this study connects the Calcutta industry to other global film production/distribution centres of London and Hollywood, to other film nodes in colonial India – Bombay, Madras, Lahore, Rangoon – and to other film nodes across the Indian Ocean – in Fiji, Singapore, Mombasa and Baghdad.

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*“A Reader asked the other day whether any films were being made in India. I have news of one that Mr. Madon [sic] made in Calcutta some months ago and sent to Pathe’s Paris studios for developing. It is called “Harishchandra” and was played by Indians. The picture was exhibited at the Elphinstone Tent in Calcutta and met with such great success as to encourage the infant industry. The photography is extremely good.”*

*[The Times of India, Bombay, April 5, 1917]*

## PROLOGUE

This blissful ignorance of Dadasaheb Phalke's<sup>1</sup> filmic activities on the part of *The Times of India's*<sup>2</sup> cinema columnist in April 1917 stands in stark contrast to the official history of Indian cinema. Notably it comes from what was, purportedly, Phalke's home ground of Bombay; yet, the TOI displays no awareness of either the Phalke or the Torney screenings from 1912 onwards.<sup>3</sup> On the contrary, the newspaper upholds the "Madon" [sic] film from Calcutta as the only Indian production that it has heard of. The columnist goes on to assert further down the same page that in fact no films had been made in or near Bombay until April 1917:

"Have not heard yet of any films being made near Bombay, so you can take it as certain that none have!"<sup>4</sup>

We now know that R. G. Torney and D. G. Phalke had both made feature length films in Bombay before 1917 and that these films had been screened in the city.<sup>5</sup> Official histories of 'Indian cinema' have since recurrently celebrated Phalke's mythical achievements, labelling him the 'Father of Indian Cinema'. In the light of this history, this comment above, by a contemporary Bombay film journalist, is a revelation. Not only does it display a complete unawareness of Phalke's achievements, but it is also significant that a Bombay newspaper columnist is reporting indigenous production in another Indian metropolis. This contradiction demands a necessary re-evaluation of official film history in India.

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<sup>1</sup> D. G. Phalke, commonly known as Dadasaheb Phalke has been traditionally acknowledged as the 'Father of Indian Cinema'.

<sup>2</sup> *The Times of India* is a leading English language daily newspaper, published from Bombay, and had a wide circulation in colonial India. Hereafter TOI.

<sup>3</sup> Torney's *Pundalik* was produced in 1912 and Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra* in 1913. Phalke had made at least two other feature films by 1917. It is understandable that the TOI columnist did not recall Torney's 1912 film, *Pundalik*, as it was not considered to be solely an Indian production, but rather a co-production with British and Indian crew and cast. Madan's 1917 film is discussed in Chapter 2.

<sup>4</sup> *The Times of India*, Bombay, April 5, 1917, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen eds, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, 2nd revised ed. (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 243. Hereafter EIC.

## INTRODUCTION

### JOURNEYS... Into Film History, the City and the Archive

At the time I embarked on this journey into the history of cinema in Calcutta few scholarly narratives of significance existed.<sup>1</sup> I was familiar with writings on Bombay cinema and came across histories of ‘Indian cinema’, but quickly realised that these overviews really focussed on Bombay, with Calcutta coming in as brief highlights. It seemed inconceivable to me that the history of one of the most significant film industries in India could be covered in a few paragraphs. At odds with these narratives were the snippets of information and names that had stirred my curiosity, especially Hiralal Sen and J.F. Madan, two rather intriguing and elusive figures who slipped in and out of these narratives. Their lurking presence, however, was enough to signal silences in this history.

Initial inquiries in Calcutta further fuelled the contradictions within the available body of scholarship. Hiralal Sen’s name always cropped up: there were claims that Sen had made a feature film as early as 1903/4 which, if true, would make it one of the first feature length films in the world, and there remained a pervasive sense of injustice at the official rejection of Sen’s claims to pioneership in favour of Phalke’s. I spoke to a wide range of people in Calcutta – cineastes, librarians, archivists, private collectors, scholars, publishers and journalists, including an octogenarian film journalist and retired postal worker engaged in film reportage from the 1940s. Often, I was referred to popular histories in Bengali to read up more on Sen and these further romanticised the figure.

Constructing a stable history of Hiralal Sen is a challenging task given that all his films were destroyed in a fire in 1917, shortly before his death, and there is barely any extant material to work with. Yet there was no getting away from the controversy on Sen’s status and the first filmic event/s in Calcutta. In the years of living with this research I have come to realise that any conversation on early film

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout I have retained the older names for these cities for reasons of historical consistency: thus Bombay, Calcutta, Madras instead of Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai.

in Calcutta always starts with a reference to Sen and the Royal Bioscope - Sen's travelling cinema - be it with cineastes, filmmakers, archivists or film scholars. Thus I start my enquiry into film history in Calcutta with an interrogation of these narratives in Chapter 2, even while acknowledging that the history of early cinema is much more than "a history of pioneers and firsts".<sup>2</sup>

The first attempt at constructing this history was to enquire into travelling cinemas, with a focus on Calcutta, and to start from the little that was known on Hiralal Sen and Madan. I visited several libraries and archives across the city, spoke to scholars, former journalists, local publishers, wrote down long lists of journals I needed to look for. But I quickly realised that this was too ambitious – little remains on the period and what remains is scattered. Access to the private papers of the Aurora Film Corporation gave hope. Aurora is the only surviving Indian studio from the silent era and had been involved in the travelling cinema business from the 1910s. However, the material in the Aurora files only starts from January 1930, and there was no information available on its travelling cinema. The absence of a detailed historical narrative on early Calcutta cinema was ever present during fieldwork, and immediately after, and another reality dawned: this narrative had to be an intrinsic part of the final thesis. Thus was the genesis of this study.

This thesis maps the emergence of cinema in Calcutta from its arrival in January 1897 - the first known film screening - to the rise of the studios and the stabilisation of the industry by the 1930s. The study is a fresh approach to writing the history of film in South Asia in that it not only shifts focus to Calcutta, from Bombay, but is also moving away from the film text to focus on institutional historiography. Whilst the narrative starts with a detailed drawing out of production history (Chapter 2) it moves towards circulation thereafter. This repositioning of the history of Calcutta cinema to circulation reveals a layered and networked industry engaged in a complex set of filmic practices within the city and also connects it to other filmic centres across South Asia and beyond. Thus the concentration on circulation rather than the film text exposes the inadequacies

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Elsaesser and Adam Barker eds., *Early Cinema, Space, Frame, Narrative* (London: BFI, 1990), 3.

of the national as a central paradigm in the study of ‘Indian cinema’ and draws our attention to alternate paradigms within which to interrogate the history of film in South Asia. The city becomes a significant character in this narrative and thus, before launching into a historiography, the thesis pauses to consider the social, cultural and economic context within which cinema arrives in Calcutta (Chapter 1).

The research has been material-led rather than problem-led, and in turn leads to a problematising of received frameworks. While the journey into the literature started with recognising the inadequacies of the official histories, in the very early stages of fieldwork it became apparent that the material was leading me on to a study of film circulation. And it is the material that highlights the limitations of textual studies and also signals the need for a paradigmatic shift in the study of film – at least in this period - interrogating the national/regional binary under which the many cinemas of India are traditionally studied.

These traditional accounts of 'Indian cinema' more often than not focus on the film text, biographical narratives and production histories. Further, it is invariably seen through a nationalist framework whereby there is a primary centre of film production in Bombay, with several regional centres: thus there is a national cinema (Bombay/Bollywood/Hindi cinema)<sup>3</sup> and regional cinemas (located in Calcutta, Madras etc.). This framework leads to the writing of a history that focusses on Bombay as the centre and subsumes histories of the other ‘regional’ centres within it.

In focussing on Calcutta cinema therefore this work would usually have been characterised as a study of the regional Bengali film industry, if seen from within the national/regional framework. This study fundamentally challenges such assumptions. By discussing the independent emergence of Calcutta as a robust centre of film that, along with Bombay, participated in the circulation of film across South Asia, the thesis shifts the debate away from the so-called centre, Bombay. In the process this study discovers that the national/regional binary is

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<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this thesis I have used the term Bombay cinema to refer to the cinema produced in the western Indian city of Bombay from the early twentieth century.

not quite an absolute frame. Further, by hinging the study on the city I join scholars like Ranjani Mazumdar in foregrounding the city as a discursive category for the study of film in South Asia, and one that helps to step away from the paradigm of the national.<sup>4</sup> However, unlike Mazumdar who recovers the urban within the film text, I engage in a discussion of metropolitan film culture, and Calcutta's centrality within transnational film circuits to arrive at Michael Curtin's concept of 'media capital' as a potentially useful premise for framing this material.<sup>5</sup> While Curtin uses the notion to discuss late twentieth century transnational media I argue that his conditions are valid for film circulation in the early history of South Asian cinema.

This thesis spans four decades bringing into its scope a varied and complex history of film. I found that the most appropriate method to deal with the vast and fragmented material was to adopt a very simple structure for the thesis – a structure that mirrors the life of a film. Thus the study starts with an interrogation into production histories within the colonial city, and then moves on to a study of circulation (distribution and exhibition). After Chapter 1, which sets the scene, Chapter 2 uses traditional methods of doing film history and substantially adds to the knowledge of film in Calcutta, in the process complicating the notion of the regional. Chapter 3 onwards the thesis moves away from the history of production to study the emergence of film circulation through a study of industry reports, journal articles and studio papers of the Aurora Film Corporation, all of which demonstrate that Calcutta was far from a regional industry in the 1920s and 1930s, with forays beyond regional boundaries - across South Asia and outside the subcontinent. Further, by focussing on film in and from the city the study explores the significance of the city, rather than the region, in the emergence of the cinema in South Asia. The institutional framework allows this study to address the problem of linking the local, i.e. Calcutta, and the national, i.e. 'Indian cinema', and to avoid the pitfalls that several studies have fallen into, of collapsing the specificities of local conditions within the meta-narrative of 'Indian cinema'.

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<sup>4</sup> Ranjani Mazumdar, *Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Michael Curtin, "Media capital: Towards the study of spatial flows," in *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 6 no. 2 (2003): 202-228.

Methodologically therefore this approach to the historiography of film in South Asia, by its very nature, interrogates the received paradigm. It is vast in its scope but this large-scale mapping was required to be able to make sense of the many components that make up the industry in Calcutta. Yet, it does not claim to be a “synoptic history”,<sup>6</sup> another grand narrative that replaces the old one. The fragmented archives and large gaps in the material render the notion untenable.

Instead I would argue that this mapping, even if fragmented, has been useful in being able to understand the complex networks of circulation that emerged within the Indian subcontinent in the 1920s and 1930s, and in diasporic sites across the Indian Ocean, even though the focus of the study remains Calcutta. A more concentrated study would not have been able to take account of the simultaneous and multifarious relationships between Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, Singapore, Mombasa, London and Hollywood, to name just a few locations that crop up through the thesis.

My approach through the period of research has been to look at the early history of film and its arrival in Calcutta as a continuum – one that is intertwined with longer histories of nineteenth century screen media, as well as with the travels of cultural forms circulating within colonial trade routes. The arrival of film in the Indian subcontinent, and its rapid proliferation at the end of the 1890s, were dependent on both these factors, but especially so in Calcutta, the capital of British India. The city therefore acquires a special role in this study – one that left its influences on the emerging cinema industry in Calcutta. The first chapter thus contextualises the social and cultural milieu within which film arrives and lays the ground to discuss the ways in which the cosmopolitan and diverse character of Calcutta shaped the rise of cinema within the city in subsequent chapters. It must be stressed that Chapter 1 works as a background using secondary sources to sketch the context, without interrogating these source narratives.

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<sup>6</sup> See Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997), 118.

Indeed, the journey as a metaphor is integral to this thesis in several ways: the arrival of film into Calcutta, its travels within the city, its travels across the eastern region and beyond, into the other provinces in colonial South Asia, as well as the transnational journeys of films produced both in Calcutta and Bombay. Within this history we cannot forget the travels of early foreign film, and the later Hollywood, into the subcontinent. My own journey as a researcher – into film history, into Calcutta and into archives, memoirs and memories - is also significant in framing this research, and in being able to arrive at a paradigm that moves away from conventional narratives of the film text, or production histories.

### **The Wonders and Limits of the Archive**

Absences in the archive are a reality for all archival researchers and particularly trying for researchers of early cinema. Much of early film is lost or survives in fragments and versions. The situation is far more challenging for scholars working on South Asian cinema as the archive is particularly limited and scattered. All that survives of the 1300+ silent films made between 1913 and 1934 can be contained into a single VHS tape.<sup>7</sup> The official archiving project started late in India: the National Film Archive of India (NFAI) was established in 1964, well over six decades after the start of film production in the country. By then a large volume of film had been destroyed in fires, badly damaged through regular screening, destroyed as scrap, or had simply not been preserved for posterity.<sup>8</sup> Despite this, hundreds of films, especially from the talkie era have miraculously survived. Further, the archival project in India is a voluntary one and dependent on the owner of the film. More often than not what survives and finds its way into the archive is through accident.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, the limited resources of the NFAI

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<sup>7</sup> EIC

<sup>8</sup> The hot and humid climate through much of South Asia is not conducive to the longevity of film. Further, once the full market potential of a film has been exhausted its value diminishes for producers and distributors and worn out films are destroyed as scrap.

<sup>9</sup> The oft-repeated example is the discovery of *Jamai Babu* (Madan Theatres, silent, 1931) - the only surviving silent film from Calcutta. A copy of the film stayed with the family of one of the distributors until Mrinal Sen's production crew visited the village in preparation for a shoot in 1980. The family handed the cans over and it was only after playing the reels that the crew discovered the significance of the accidental find.

do not allow for restoration and preservation of all extant film. Thus what finds priority for restoration is often based on the canon, or on sustained demand.<sup>10</sup>

When I first embarked on the fieldwork all that I had to work with was a fragment of one silent film and a handful of talkies produced in Calcutta. A few trade journals from the 1930s and film booklets and posters also remained but again there are several missing issues. The fragmented and absent material results in a methodological problem: in the absence of film and filmic material how does one engage in a historiography of film?

The limits of the official archive necessitated a different approach. It encouraged parallel and intuitive searches across archives and libraries and to start to look beyond the film text. Accessing a range of literary, theatrical and newspaper archives in Bengali and English led to the bringing in of a diverse set of texts within the purview of this research. On reflection this approach was beneficial: it moulded this research and took it in new directions through a lateral reading of several documents. Further, it also highlighted the limitations of working solely out of the filmic archive, which operated within its own canon, even in its earliest days in the 1960s, resulting in mediated access and a historiography that centred around Bombay cinema.

Much of my research has been conducted in non-film archives in Calcutta. This created a new problem, as the cataloguing in these archives did not include film as a valid and searchable category, and thus prompted intuitive searches. One had to work like a detective, meticulously going through card catalogues in the hope of stumbling across useful texts and piecing together clues, conducting lateral searches within and across archives. This approach has been particularly useful in locating new material, both inside and outside the official archive. While it has led me to find useful material in archives where film was not a searchable subject in the card cataloguing systems, it has also been useful in locating material from within digital catalogues, like that of the British Library or NFAI. Further it has

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<sup>10</sup> Though even films from the canon are lost or inaccessible, a good example being films from the New Wave in the 1970s.

led me to access the private papers in the Aurora cabinets and also to locate material in private collections, like that of Devajit Bandyopadhyay in Calcutta.

The writing too reflects this approach, especially in Chapter 2, which picks up clues from the official history and then attempts to construct a more detailed and nuanced narrative, asking questions of the new detail that appears as a result of this analogous reading of several different, often contradictory, sources. The detailed production historiography in Chapter 2 results in new questions emerging of production practices that then lead on to inquiry into circulation practices, which in turn leads to a more focused analysis into circulation through a case study based approach of the Aurora archives. The material thus guides the logic of the chapterisation of this thesis, as well as where the thesis leads to: towards a paradigm that goes beyond the national/regional binary to a more fluid understanding of regional and national boundaries through the concept of the 'trans-'. Hence the trans-regional, and the trans-national become operative terms by the end of the thesis, just as the trans-national is a crucial term at the beginning of the thesis. This journey, from trans-national arrivals to trans-national departures, via travels undertaken by films within and beyond the city gives rise to a dynamic set of practices that are predicated on networks. By the end of the thesis we see the formation of new networks of circulation – networks that are based on, but in essence distinct from, those seen at the beginning of the journey in the late 1890s.

A further thought needs to be mentioned on this writing. While the evidence is fragmented there is plenty of material available if one is willing to look. This fragmentary and scattered nature of the material lends itself to a form of speculative research through which we can start to construct narratives. Speculation allows us to explore the scope of a historiography where only a sketchy narrative exists, along with anecdotes, myths and legends, even while being aware that this is speculation.

The Madan story is one such example. Built largely on secondary sources the myriad clues strewn through the material allow for the weaving of a narrative of this pan-Indian media empire of the silent and early talkie era. The studio papers

found in the Aurora cabinets require a different approach. The extensive documents in the early 1930s, even though fragmented, allow us a detailed glimpse into circulation practices in the early days of the Aurora Film Corporation, including the crucial period of March 1931, when the first sound films were released. The files give us an insight into the strategy of Imperial<sup>11</sup> in Calcutta, and responses of cinema owners and distributors to the arrival of this new technology, even while they continue to leave us in the dark on Imperial's production practices in the making of India's first sound film in Bombay, or of the competition between Madan and Imperial in the race to the talkies, or indeed of the Madans' endeavours in bringing sound to Indian screens.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, the few clues to the Madans' international distribution leave room for speculation – clues that cannot be ignored. Yet, while not all of the questions that arise from the material can be answered, it is important to pose the questions and answer as many of these as possible. Thus, it is possible to study the layered nature of film circulation across South Asia in the 1920s and early 1930s and to explore the nature of Aurora's transnational distributions from the few documents remaining in their cabinets.

During the course of this research I have consulted a wide range of primary material including exhibition contracts; distribution contracts; official correspondence in the Aurora files; film booklets; censor certificates; industry reports; articles in film journals; advertisements in newspapers and journals; photographs; films; memoirs of people in the film industry; biographies and relevant publications in Bengali and English; and also gleaned information from conversations with a range of librarians, archivists, private collectors, journalists and scholars in Calcutta. In addition conversations with Anjan Bose, the present owner of Aurora, and other staff in Aurora have been useful.

Apart from the records in the offices of Aurora these materials were found through Kolkata: primarily in the National Library of India, Bangiya Sahitya

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<sup>11</sup> Imperial Movietone (1926-1938) was a major Bombay studio and producer of India's first sound feature film, *Alam Ara* (1931).

<sup>12</sup> Madan Theatres' *Shirin Farhad* (1931) was released within a few days of *Alam Ara*, but the Madans had started to experiment with sound production with short films, earlier in 1931, testing them out in cinemas. Further, they were the first exhibitors to screen Hollywood sound films in South Asia. See below.

Parishat, the archives in the Centre for the Study of Social Sciences, the library in the Film Department of Jadavpur University, Natyashodh, Nandan Film Library and the private collection of Devajit Bandyopadhyay. I have also accessed the National Film Archives of India in Pune and the British Library.

The archival journey is a long-winded one, requiring instinct and perseverance to overcome the frustration of dead-ends, an immersion and an openness, but often resulting in many happy accidents and chance discoveries. The notion of the continuum first struck me while working simultaneously across several archives in Calcutta. It was in the archive that I came across scribes who physically copied articles and sections of texts that were too old to be photocopied. This continuation of the old and the new within the archive – human copiers along with photocopying and photographing - first led me to think of continuing practices and technologies. At the same time the connections between Bombay, Calcutta and Madras were becoming increasingly clear while simultaneously spending afternoons going through the Aurora files. That older practices continued alongside newer ones is apparent right across the thesis – from the use of lantern slides alongside film in 1901, to the reading aloud of inter-titles by audiences in cinemas in the 1920s, to the continuation of silent film screenings in the sound era in the 1930s. These are just a few examples of continuities of screen practices over time despite minimal time lag between the introduction of new technologies in the West and their arrival in Calcutta. Further, the networks that connect the city with the *mofussil*<sup>13</sup> within provincial boundaries, as well as the local with the trans-regional, and the transnational, suggest not only the importance of micro-practices but larger connections across time and space that sustain these practices. These vital continuities of time and space also bring alive the possibilities of comparisons between the historical moment of the early transnational encounters of South Asian cinema and that of ‘Global Bollywood’ in the contemporary moment.

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<sup>13</sup> The term *mofussil* is translated from the Bengali as hinterland, i.e. the area surrounding cities, which include suburban areas and towns (including small towns) located away from the metropolitan centre. The term can thus be understood to refer to non-metropolitan circulation and reception. This is how I use the term through this thesis.

## **A Review of the Literature: The problem of film history**

Before moving into early film history in Calcutta it may be useful to engage with the existing literature; however this is a brief overview and I dialogue with the range of literature in more specific detail within the chapters.

The received history of early 'Indian cinema' narrates a tale of pioneers and of heroic efforts to establish an indigenous industry. It places enormous emphasis on the first cinema event: the Bombay screening of the Lumière films by Marius Sestier on July 7, 1896. Thereafter it tends to quickly move on to highlight the glorious achievements of indigenous productions – primarily Phalke, along with a handful of other pioneers. The general trend is biographical, often anecdotal, and primarily based on production histories.<sup>14</sup> The anecdotal and biographical detail remains useful sources for constructing production histories, however there is little on circulation apart from Barnouw and Krishnaswamy. Further this received narrative has a teleological approach and treats silent cinema as a mere stepping stone to the 'real thing' – that is sound film. Very little space is devoted to the extensive productions across India in the silent era, with the exception of Barnouw and Krishnaswamy's and Firoze Rangoonwalla's standard histories. As Stephen Hughes rightly points out, the received history narrates early cinema as the "heroic rise of the indigenous industry which struggled with meagre technical and financial resources, but who also eventually succeeded against the unfair competition of foreign films."<sup>15</sup>

The foundational myth of Indian cinema, as per the standard history, goes something like this: around Christmas, 1910, Dadasaheb Phalke saw *The Life of Christ* and was so moved that at that very moment he conceived of a film based on Indian mythological figures made for an Indian audience – in this case

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<sup>14</sup> See Eric Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film* 2nd edition (New York; London: Oxford University Press, 1980); Rani Burra ed. *Looking Back, 1896-1960* (New Delhi : Directorate of Film Festivals, 1981); Firoze Rangoonwalla, *Seventy Five Years of Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Indian Book Co., 1975); Panna Shah, *The Indian Film* (Bombay: 1950); *Cinema Vision*, vols 1-4 (1980); T. M. Ramachandran ed., *Indian Talkie, 1931-1981: Fifty Years of Indian Talkies* (Delhi, 1981); Ramachandran ed., *Seventy Years of Indian Cinema* (Bombay: Cinema India International, 1985).

<sup>15</sup> Stephen P. Hughes, "Is There Anyone Out There? Exhibition and the Formation of Silent Film Audiences in South India" (Ph.D, University of Chicago, 1996).

Krishna, a Hindu God.<sup>16</sup> And so, single-mindedly, Phalke went about acquiring the finances, resources and the training to make a feature film. This included selling off the family jewels and travelling to London under great financial difficulty to undertake training in the new technology and buy the necessary equipment. Thus was created *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), long credited as the first Indian feature film, though later scholarship questions its pioneering status.<sup>17</sup> And this was the beginning of an industry that went on to become one of the largest in the world and developed a unique filmic language and style that managed to consistently withstand the onslaught of foreign films, especially Hollywood.

In addition to the nationalist underpinnings of this tale of the birth of 'Indian cinema', this received narrative also tends to focus on the film text, valorising the genres of the social, mythological and historical, and foregrounding nationalist readings.<sup>18</sup> This nationalist discourse pre-supposes the presence of a national cinema and, by extension, regional cinemas within the territorial boundaries of colonial India. A further problem of much of the early scholarship is that although it uses the term 'Indian cinema' it primarily tends to focus on mainstream Bombay cinema, and the histories of the other cinemas in India are often absorbed within the meta-narrative of a 'national' cinema. Despite this, however, several film industries continue to exist in India, with some of their roots going right back to the silent era. These include the 'regional' film industries of Madras and Calcutta, among many others. As a result of this oversight the specificity of the other film histories is often lost. This tendency of the earlier literature, especially pre-1990, to subsume the histories of the various cinema industries within India into the overarching category of 'Indian cinema', which largely deals with Bombay cinema, could stem from a drawback within the discipline of film studies itself, which tends to relegate non-Hollywood cinemas to the realm of national cinemas. This, coupled with the predominance of nationalist discourses in general

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<sup>16</sup> This myth was also drawn from Phalke's own assertions written in 1917. See D. G. Phalke, *Essays on Indian Cinema*, 'Bhartiya Chitrapat' in *Navyug*, Bombay: Nov 1917, quoted in Rajadhyaksha, "The Phalke Era: Conflict of Traditional Form and New Technology", in T. Niranjana et al ed., *Interrogating Modernity: Culture and Colonialism in India*, (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> See EIC.

<sup>18</sup> See in particular articles in *Cinema Vision* and Rani Burra ed. *Looking Back*.

in the study of this period in India, has led to a somewhat skewed narrative of the emergence of 'Indian cinema'.<sup>19</sup>

The problems with this received narrative are not unique to the history of film in India; indeed as Elsaesser and Barker point out, this is characteristic of older trends in film historiography which recount "the history of the cinema as the story of fearless pioneers, of 'firsts', of adventure and discovery, of great masters and masterpieces".<sup>20</sup> Given this bias towards production, very little is known about the early film industry and its formation across India, and the institutional history of exhibition, distribution and reception has for long remained fuzzy, at best. What is lost in these accounts are the complex processes of the creation of a robust industry, or rather industries, of the stimulus that cinema generated in the rich texture of urban life, and how it impacted the cultural geography of the cities of colonial India. This unfortunate scholarly and archival oversight has also led to the degeneration and loss of much material, including films, and literature around the films and film cultures.

This thesis highlights the inadequacies of the received historiography of 'Indian cinema' on two counts: first it moves away from the framework of 'Indian cinema', that is centred on Bombay, to focus on the history of the cinema in Calcutta in some detail. In addition, the study also moves away from textual analysis of films to concentrate on an institutional historiography of Calcutta cinema. In the process this study takes a pluralist approach, highlighting the parallel growth of cinema in several cities in South Asia and it shifts the spotlight to specific local contexts of production, distribution and exhibition. This is not to suggest, however, that the industries in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras grew in isolation; rather by focussing on circulation, and drawing out the linkages between these three centres, the study hopes to understand the networks and processes by which cinema became the most significant entertainment form of twentieth century India.

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<sup>19</sup> Also see Willemsen, Preface to EIC, for a useful discussion on the inadequacies of the national.

<sup>20</sup> Elsaesser and Barker eds., *Early Cinema*, 3.

Scholarship on early cinema in India picked up from the 1980s and a number of journals and anthologies were published, providing anecdotal and biographical accounts that reiterated the nationalist strand. Scholarly texts from this period largely concentrated on aesthetic readings of the film text, primarily focussing on ways in which the nation has been imagined in the early films produced under colonial rule.<sup>21</sup> The works continued to discuss ‘Indian cinema’ as a homogeneous national entity, without taking into account local specificities and stressed the role of Bombay films as agents of cultural modernity and nationalist ideology. Notable amongst these is Ashish Rajadhyaksha’s article on Phalke, which dwells on the conflict of cultural modernity and traditional societies in the colonial context.<sup>22</sup>

The evidence that brings into question these nationalist readings of early cinema in India is to be found in Kristin Thompson’s study of the early American film industry.<sup>23</sup> This work looks at the gradual domination of the world film markets by American films between 1907 and 1934. It does not take on nationalist histories of ‘Indian cinema’; rather Thompson’s appraisal of the Indian market finds its way in as a small part of her analysis of the widening global distribution and exhibition networks, and evolving policies of early American film companies and the later Hollywood studios. The study points to the domination of American films in India in the 1910s and 1920s and throws open the possibilities for an industrial reading of early cinema as a transnational cultural commodity that directly challenges textual methods and nationalist readings of early ‘Indian cinema’. Through this reading important details begin to emerge: the establishment of a distribution agency in India by Pathé Frères, c. 1907, and by Universal, another Hollywood major, in 1916.<sup>24</sup> These details, overlooked in nationalist histories, suggest that India was part of a larger global economy of film trade in the 1910s and 1920s – a position that I retain in this study.

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<sup>21</sup> See Articles in *Cinema Vision*, vols. 1-4 (1980); Rani Burra ed. *Looking Back*; Ramachandran ed., *Seventy Years of Indian Cinema*; Aruna Vasudev and Philippe Lenglet eds., *Indian Cinema Superbazaar*. (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1983); Rajadhyaksha, “Indian Cinema: Origins to Independence” in *Oxford History of World Cinema*, ed. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York: Oxford, 1996).

<sup>22</sup> Rajadhyaksha, “The Phalke Era”. Also see Rajadhyaksha, “Neo-Traditionalism: Film as Popular Art in India.” *Framework* 32-33 (1986): 20-67.

<sup>23</sup> Kristin Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market 1907-1934* (London: BFI, 1985).

<sup>24</sup> Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, 298.

A renewed interest in silent cinema in the 1990s saw the NFAI concentrate on archiving available films and materials and making these accessible. An exhaustive filmography of silent cinema was compiled by Virchand Dharamsey to accompany the retrospective of the Pordenone Silent Film Festival in 1994.<sup>25</sup> This includes not only an extensive list of film titles but also cast and production details, and remains one of the most important resources for the study of the period, along with Firoze Rangoonwalla's 1968 filmography of both silent and sound films categorised by language.<sup>26</sup> The other invaluable empirical source is the *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, which provides information on films, cast, crew, studios, and a broad cultural and political context.<sup>27</sup> It also includes a comprehensive bibliography of extant scholarship, archival sources, as well as a record of film journalism. In sharp contrast to earlier histories of classics and pioneers these efforts signal a far denser narrative of a prolific industry-in-the-making.

Along with these, another significant source text for conducting early film historiography remains Barnouw and Krishnaswamy's pioneering volume, *Indian Film*. A remarkable first study, it contains a wealth of information that later narratives can only aspire to, even though it is written in keeping with earlier trends of film historiography and underlines the centrality of Bombay within the grand narrative of 'Indian cinema'. Yet, despite this predisposition, Barnouw and Krishnaswamy includes a range of references that gestures towards larger narratives – information that I have repeatedly returned to, to consult and crosscheck<sup>28</sup>

In addition to these, the *Bengali Film Directory* gives an exhaustive listing of Bengali films produced in Calcutta from 1917, along with details of cast and crew, which has allowed me to conduct and interrogate production histories.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Suresh Chabria, Virchand Dharamsey and Paolo Cherchi Usai, eds., *Light of Asia: Indian Silent Cinema, 1912-1934* (Pune: NFAI, 1994).

<sup>26</sup> Firoze Rangoonwalla, *Indian Films Index 1912 - 1967* (Bombay: 1968).

<sup>27</sup> EIC.

<sup>28</sup> Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*.

<sup>29</sup> Ansu Sur, ed., *Bengali Film Directory*, (Calcutta: Nandan, West Bengal Film Centre, 1999). Hereafter Nandan Directory.

Another key source is Kalish Mukherjee's popular history of Bengali cinema. Written in the 1950s, this was still close enough to the early decades to be able to draw on interviews, conversations, filmic and extra-filmic material and first-hand memories of a wide range of people within the industry. Mukherjee speaks of forays into the red-light district in Calcutta to unearth photographs and memories – a task that is inordinately challenging today given the scattered and limited nature of extant material from the period. I have therefore also treated this volume as a base from which to construct a history of production in Calcutta. Biographies of Hiralal Sen too have been useful sources, although these need to be read laterally and crosschecked to arrive at a stable narrative.<sup>30</sup> Additional primary sources used include memoirs of actors, theatre and film journals published from Calcutta and Bombay in the 1920s, along with anthologies of articles, newspaper reports and advertisements. The majority of this material is in Bengali and sourced from several archives in Calcutta, from private collections, or directly from publishers. Industry reports, including the *Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee* of 1927-28, and the accompanying five volumes of *Evidences* also form an invaluable source that allows the most detailed insight available into the film industries of South Asia in the 1920s, even though the interactions need to be read within a colonial framework, as discussed below.<sup>31</sup> The rich detail in the Aurora papers allows a significant development of the distribution narrative in the 1930s, highlighting industry practices and networks for the first time. These sources form the base of this historiography and are taken up for more specific discussion through the thesis.

Contemporary scholarship has thrown some light on the early years and tried to correct this bias towards production, at the same time highlighting the specific institutional contexts of the different industries within India. Stephen Hughes' study on the formation of silent film audiences in South India dwells on the strategies and measures adopted by exhibitors in Madras to stay afloat and expand their business. Hughes talks in some detail of the role of two travelling showmen

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<sup>30</sup> Saikat Asghar, *Hiralal Sen* (Dacca: Bangla Academy, 1993); Sajal Chatterjee, *Aar Rekhona Aadhare* (Calcutta: Jogomaya Prokashoni, 1998); Jha, "Patriarchs of Indian Cinema: J.F.Madan and B.N.Sircar," in Ramachandran ed., *Seventy Years of Indian Cinema*.

<sup>31</sup> *Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee 1927-28* (Calcutta: 1928) and *ICC Evidences*. Hereafter ICC and ICCE.

in particular in building the exhibition business in the Madras Presidency. The study touches on the multiple, often creative, strategies adopted by these exhibitors to negotiate the amalgam of challenges posed by competing entertainment shows, real estate regulations, governmental policies and the need to bring in audiences.<sup>32</sup>

A recent landmark study by Kaushik Bhaumik has explored the growth of the early Bombay cinema industry, from 1913 to 1936. The detailed mapping of the social and cultural history of Bombay cinema brings into its ambit production and exhibition histories, and the emergence of a range of early film genres, including what Bhaumik terms “*bazaar* cinema” (popular/working class cinema). This intricate institutional history of Bombay cinema unravels a complex narrative that I dialogue with through the thesis.<sup>33</sup>

Another study on the genealogy of action genres in Bombay cinema by Valentina Vitali explores the connections between circulation and the rise of action genres in Bombay. In the process Vitali sketches a history of ‘Indian cinema’ in the 1910s and 1920s from available sources, referring to highlights in Calcutta, and thereby subsumes film history in Calcutta within the metanarrative of Bombay cinema, not quite acknowledging the differences between the two territories and audience profiles.<sup>34</sup>

In recent years a few contemporary scholarly works have started to explore the early history of Calcutta cinema and its audience. Manishita Dass’ enquiry into how modernity was configured through notions of audiences in the 1920s, and her conclusion that the ICC did not have a homogeneous conception of the audience, is of particular significance to this thesis. This study of the mass audience, as evinced in the ICC and ICCE, shifts the debates on early Indian cinema from the film texts of Phalke to the social context and reception, and from “the cinematic

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<sup>32</sup> Hughes, “Is There Anyone Out There?”

<sup>33</sup> Kaushik Bhaumik, “The Emergence of the Bombay Film Industry, 1913-1936” (D.Phil, University of Oxford, 2001).

<sup>34</sup> Valentina Vitali, *Hindi Action Cinema: Industries, Narratives, Bodies* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008).

imagination of the nation to the social imagination of the cinematic public.”<sup>35</sup> Dass rightly recognises that both the Committee members, and those interviewed, came from the elite classes. She introduces Angel Rama’s concept of the “lettered city” to discuss a cinematic public split into an anglicised, “lettered” elite and an uneducated mass.

Dass’ exposition of the fragmented nature of ICC audiences is important, and one that I take further to discuss an even more divided audience in the specific instance of Calcutta in the 1920s and 1930s. Yet, Dass too seamlessly moves across Bombay and Calcutta in her analysis of audiences and films, glossing over differences in the specific contexts, even while recognising the existence of a “plurality of film cultures”. This is in sharp contrast to the workings of the ICC, which conducted separate interviews in each of the regions in its effort to understand regional disparities.

A second doctoral dissertation that deals specifically with Calcutta is Smarani Mukherjee’s recent survey of the emergence of film culture in Calcutta.<sup>36</sup> Mukherjee’s thesis documents film culture in this period and traces the emergence of the audience of Bengali films. She also traces the linkages between audience tastes and practices of the cinema, the theatre, and the popular literature in the first three decades of the twentieth century. While this work is significant in its attempt at historicising Bengali cinema, it remains no more than a historical record of the era, providing useful information on which I build in order to develop my focus on circulation. Mukherjee argues that, unlike in the contexts of American cinema, or of Bombay cinema, the audience for Bengali cinema was primarily from the lower middle classes, the “*petit bourgeoisie*, including clerks in government and mercantile offices, school teachers, hack-writers etc.”<sup>37</sup> Basing her findings on the ICCE, she claims that this was in sharp contrast to the rest of India where the audience was largely uneducated.

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<sup>35</sup> Manishita Dass, “Outside the Lettered City: Cinema, Modernity and Nation in India” (Ph.D., Stanford University, 2004), 17.

<sup>36</sup> Smarani Mukherjee, “Moments of Modernity: Cinema and Social Response in Bengal Between the Two World Wars” (Ph.D. Jadavpur University, Calcutta, 2005).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 58-59.

Both these works start to conceptualise the audience in Calcutta, yet arrive at very different conclusions. While Mukherjee's conception of the audience for Bengali cinema is primarily middle class, Dass' discussion of the ICC audience is as the "unlettered" other. Mukherjee's findings are evidently determined by her framing of Calcutta cinema as Bengali cinema and thus one could argue that she is ignoring the other films screened in the city. This neat division of the cinema audience into the elite and the *petit bourgeoisie* in Mukherjee's case, or the elite and the "unlettered" other in Dass' argument, simply cannot account for the wide demand for a variety of films in the city that included several genres of both Bombay films and Hollywood films, along with Bengali cinema – a point that I dwell on in this thesis.

An addition to these is Sudhir Mahadevan's doctoral dissertation on the history of the traffic in screen technologies in Bengal. While taking a significant stance in situating the history of film within a longer history of screen media in South Asia, especially photography, Mahadevan's study also calls for "nuanced regional distinctions in the study of early cinema in South Asia."<sup>38</sup> Mahadevan argues that specific conditions, like non-access to exhibition venues and lack of inter-titles, allowed early cinema in Bengal to take a different path and develop unique practices that distinguished it from developments in Europe and America, as well as from Bombay. His main argument hinges on the point that Bengal had a larger number of travelling cinemas and far fewer permanent cinemas, and thereby, he argues, film culture in Bengal was primarily non-urban and itinerant. This thesis departs from this position by arguing that film culture in urban India was markedly different from rural India, and thus discussions of early film culture in Calcutta cannot be subsumed within that of the rest of the Bengal province.

Contemporary literature has therefore started to recognise the inadequacies of the national cinema paradigm and it is worth considering the alternative framings that are to be found in this literature. The first steps away from the meta-narrative of 'Indian cinema' have been to consider the region in more specific detail. Thus, to summarise, Hughes' study of early audiences in Madras is a detailed

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<sup>38</sup> Sudhir Mahadevan, "The Traffic in Technologies: Early Cinema and Visual Culture in Bengal, 1840–1920," (Ph.D, New York University, 2009), 42.

historiography of early cinema in South India, while Bhaumik's study of Bombay cinema explores the specificities of the emergent industry in the western Indian metropolis. Mukherjee explores the interactions between the elite and cinema in Bengal while Mahadevan's study frames the regional history in Bengal as a non-metropolitan and itinerant film culture.

Arguably, these histories of the emergence of cinema industries in Madras, and Bombay in particular, are also closely tied in to their respective cities, and can also be considered to be city film histories, even though the authors do not position the works as such. In contrast, Ranjani Mazumdar consciously mobilises the city as an alternative paradigm to national cinema in her study of the urban experience mediated by Bombay cinema from the 1970s.<sup>39</sup> Madhava Prasad's enquiry into the Bombay films of the 1970s also draws on the city of Bombay as a discursive category within which to study these films.<sup>40</sup> Ravi Vasudevan's work on the configuration of the city within the narrative frame of Bombay cinema is also significant here.<sup>41</sup> Further, as Vasudevan points out, current scholarship is increasingly engaging with the city as "a material and imaginative form" in a reworking of melodramatic mode, genres and circulation practices.<sup>42</sup> Thus the city emerges as an alternate site from which to construct a discourse of cinema in South Asia.

A third frame that has been emerging in the literature is what I would term the colonial-transnational. Priya Jaikumar discounts the nationalist paradigm by drawing on the connected histories of Britain and India through an exegesis of

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<sup>39</sup> See Mazumdar, *Bombay Cinema*.

<sup>40</sup> Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>41</sup> Ravi Vasudevan, "Selves Made Strange: Violent and Performative Bodies in the Cities of Indian Cinema 1974- 2003", in Indira Chandrasekhar and Peter C. Siehl, eds., *body. city: Siting Contemporary Culture in India* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2003).

<sup>42</sup> Vasudevan, *The Melodramatic Public: Film Form and Spectatorship in Indian Cinema* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2010). Also see Vasudevan, "Cinema in Urban Space," *Seminar 525: Unsettling Cinema*, May 2003, <http://www.india-seminar.com/2003/525.htm>; Hughes, "The Pre-Phalke Era"; Preben Kaarsholm, ed., *City Flicks: Indian Cinema and the Urban Experience* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2004); S.V. Srinivas, "Hong Kong Action Film in the Indian B Circuit," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 4, no. 1, 2003: 40-62; Rosie Thomas, "Not Quite (Pearl) White: Fearless Nadia, queen of the stunts." In *Bollyworld: Popular Indian Cinema Through a Transnational Lens*, eds., Raminder Kaur and Ajay J. Sinha (Delhi: Sage, 2005), 35-69; <http://www.sarai.net/research/media-city/field-notes/film-city>.

colonial film policy between 1927 and 1947, and its bearing on film aesthetic.<sup>43</sup> Prem Chowdhry's earlier enquiry into Empire films, and their reception in India, is a useful study of the intersection of colonial and nationalist agendas in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>44</sup> Mahadevan and Hughes also discuss the significance of the colonial networks in the arrival of nineteenth century screen technologies to India.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, Vasudevan invokes migrations of labour from India to other colonies of the British Empire as a necessary condition that needs to be brought into the discussion of South Asian cinema and their transnational travels, and calls for a "multi-sited history".<sup>46</sup>

My institutional study of Calcutta cinema inhabits two of these alternate frames to the national – that of city film history and that of the colonial-transnational. It is very much a narrative of the cinema as it emerged in the city, and yet contingent on colonial transnational circuits through which it arrives in the city, and via which it circulates amongst diasporic populations. This dual framing of city film history along with colonial-transnational circuits allows this study to move beyond the inadequacies of the nationalist paradigm of 'Indian cinema'.

This thesis thus supplements ongoing discussions by drawing the colonial-transnational as a critical frame within which to explore the arrival of film into Calcutta, its subcontinental travels, and its departures outside the subcontinent, and placing the city – Calcutta – as a central node within this frame. The city thus becomes a site and a "nexus or switching point", to borrow Michael Curtin's phrase,<sup>47</sup> from which to construct film histories. This and other literature on the transnational will be taken up for further discussion in the final two chapters of this thesis.

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<sup>43</sup> Priya Jaikumar, *Cinema at the End of Empire: A Politics of Transition in Britain and India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

<sup>44</sup> Empire films refers to a set of films made in the 1930s and 1940s that portrayed a specific view of the empire and reiterated the superiority of imperial power. See Prem Chowdhry, *Colonial India and the Making of Empire Cinema: Image, Ideology and Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

<sup>45</sup> Hughes, "Is There Anyone Out There?"; Mahadevan, "Traffic in Technologies".

<sup>46</sup> Vasudevan, "Geographies of the Cinematic Public: Notes on Regional, National and Global Histories of Indian Cinema." *Journal of the Moving Image* 9 (2010), [http://www.jmionline.org/jmi9\\_6.htm](http://www.jmionline.org/jmi9_6.htm). Also see, Vasudevan, *The Melodramatic Public*, 208.

<sup>47</sup> Michael Curtin, "Media capital: Towards the study of spatial flows," in *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 6 no. 2 (2003): 202-228.

This study thus aims to further the understanding of early cinema in Calcutta and South Asia by moving away from earlier production-oriented literature on mainstream Bombay cinema, to focus on institutional historiography and to contest nationalist readings of the early film texts. Much of the evidence that leads to this reading, like the Aurora papers, has never been brought into the public domain and this mapping of the industry enables me to link the local, national and transnational cinema circuits without glossing over differences between the cinemas and the specific conditions in Calcutta and Bombay. In concentrating on a historiography of the Calcutta industry it supplements the work done by Hughes and Bhaumik, yet it tilts towards circulation more than either of these two studies – in being able to work with studio papers related to distribution.

The institutional reading that I have adopted also follows the approach taken by Douglas Gomery, Kristin Thompson, Charles Musser and others in interrogating received narratives of Hollywood.<sup>48</sup> Gomery, in his study of Warner Bros' innovation of sound, questions the accepted narrative that attributes Warner Bros' adoption of sound technology to impending bankruptcy based on his scrutiny of primary evidence and calls for a 'revisionist history'.<sup>49</sup> I follow a similar method and this approach allows me to come to rather different conclusions than those espoused by the received narrative of 'Indian cinema'. My study therefore is an attempt to extend the scope of Indian film historiography and chart out new ways of thinking about the histories and trajectories of early film in, and of, South Asia.

### **Thesis Chapter Outline**

**Chapter 1** is a background chapter that draws on the history of Calcutta and is based on secondary literature without interrogating the literature. It discusses the context in which the cinema arrived in Calcutta - social, economic, cultural and spatial through established colonial trade routes. The first part of the chapter

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<sup>48</sup>See Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (New York: Scribner, 1990); Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1992; Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment*.

<sup>49</sup> Gomery, "Writing the History of the American Film Industry: Warner Bros and Sound," in *Screen Histories: A Screen Reader* eds., Annette Kuhn and Jackie Stacey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 139-147.

highlights the cosmopolitan character of late nineteenth century Calcutta that is home to a diverse set of communities, and not just the *bhadralok*, and Calcutta as a key city within the British Empire. The second part of this chapter provides a brief overview of established forms of culture and entertainment in the city which went on to impact the cinema and cinema-going, including folk forms like the *jatra*, and modern public entertainment like the Bengali, European and Parsi theatres. And finally the chapter arrives at a discussion of the global circuits of colonial entertainment and trade in screen technologies – circuits via which film arrived in Calcutta.

**Chapter 2** focusses on production history in Calcutta - the growth of production, consolidation of the industry and the rise of the studio system. It explores contemporary debates around the cinema that try to define and shape the cinema of Calcutta. It also studies the emergence of a range of genres and multiple language productions for other circuits. The chapter argues that this detailed mapping of production reveals a complex and robust industry that grew independently of, and concurrently with, Bombay. In the process this chapter interrogates why this vibrant story of Calcutta cinema has been written out of the history of ‘Indian cinema’.

**Chapter 3** looks into film circulation in the city, which in turn offers an insight into film circulation in South Asia until the end of the 1920s. It enquires into the presence of a wide range of audiences in the cinemas of the city and a range of practices that catered to these diverse audiences. The chapter reveals a complex, layered structure of exhibition in Calcutta in the 1920s and the role of these layers in building the film industries of South Asia. In the process the chapter demonstrates that moving away from narratives of production, and the film text, to focus on circulation gives rise to a different, and broader, narrative of cinema in Calcutta in the 1920s. The chapter thus sets up the context for the case study of Aurora that follows.

**Chapter 4** takes a closer look at circulation, focussing on Aurora, a little-studied but key studio in the city, and discussing how film circulation - both distribution and exhibition - is effected in the 1930s. This is the first such study of circulation

based on studio records from this period. The Aurora papers reveal a complex and intricately networked industry with close links between Calcutta, Bombay and Madras, and the importance of the secondary circuits in creating and sustaining a pan-Indian network of circulation that furthered the 'cinema habit' across the cities, towns and villages of South Asia. The findings from this chapter thus challenge the neat categorisation of the film industry within India into regional and national, and therefore question the centrality of Bombay in the history of 'Indian cinema'.

**Chapter 5** extends this argument beyond the subcontinental arena, exploring transnational circulation by Calcutta studios, through the Aurora papers, and thus further questioning Calcutta's invisibility within the discourse of 'Indian cinema'.

**Chapter 6** then frames this study by extending Michael Curtin's argument of 'media capital' to early film history in South Asia and argues for a multi-centric paradigm of cinema in South Asia. It weaves in the narrative strands of film in the city and film in the transnational together, through the concept of 'media capital' to stress on the critical imperative to move beyond the 'national' and incorporate the 'local', 'national' and 'transnational' into early film historiography in South Asia.

The thesis therefore is not just a historical trajectory of Bengali cinema in the first four decades. By focussing on Calcutta the study traces the arrival of film in the city, the emergence and consolidation of the Calcutta film industry, and not simply the Bengali film industry, the travels of Calcutta, Bombay and Hollywood films within Calcutta, and the journeys of Calcutta films beyond regional and national limits. The thesis thus is not limited to the Bengali film industry but takes into account films in several languages (Bengali, English, Hindi, Tamil, Telegu, Urdu) and produced in several industries including that of Calcutta, Bombay, Madras and Hollywood. Thus, this film historical research encompasses several film industries in its scope, traversing borders, and arguing against the 'national' or the 'regional' as defining categories for the study of film history, especially Indian film history.

## CHAPTER 1

### CALCUTTA IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The thesis shifts the focus from the national to posit the city as a significant site for thinking through film history in South Asia. This chapter serves as a brief *aide memoire* to the modern, cosmopolitan city that was Calcutta in the late nineteenth century – a city with a strong and distinct urban culture, and at the centre of global trade routes.

The first section of the chapter highlights the presence of the many peoples and languages, while the second focuses on the rise of public entertainment - which, like the city, had multiple forms, spaces, and languages. Understanding the growth of the city and its habitation pattern is important to appreciate the scope of entertainment and exhibition patterns that developed in the city through the early twentieth century, and also to recognise the heterogeneous nature of cinema audiences in the city. It is also crucial to understanding the co-existence of several cinemas in Calcutta, especially the popularity of Bombay cinema, in the 1920s and 1930s. This will be discussed at length in subsequent chapters dealing with circulation of film in the city.

The third section focuses on the presence of nineteenth century screen technologies and the colonial networks through which these arrived in the city. The history of film needs to be understood within a larger history of circulation - of arrivals of pre-cinematic technologies, cultural troupes, colonial trade routes etc. mapped onto an understanding of the city and the specific cultural and spatial context in which these arrive – because all of this is contingent on the rise of cinema into a vibrant institution that became an intrinsic part of urban culture by the 1930s.

Thus, even though the chapter is largely based on secondary sources, as a whole it brings out a complex city with many cultures and audiences which is at the intersection of global circuits of commerce and thus is fertile ground for the

arrival of the cinema and its growth into a major film industry in the subcontinent. And while I recognise that this history of the city can be complicated it is beyond the scope of this chapter, or this thesis, to interrogate into general histories of nineteenth century Calcutta; rather the attempt here is to signal a rich and diverse social and cultural past by sketching a cursory narrative that serves as a backdrop to the thesis, contextualising the city and its culture for ensuing discussions on film history in the city.

## **1.1 THE CITY AND ITS PEOPLES**

The area on the banks of the river Hooghly that became Calcutta had been a commercial hub, with a cluster of trading villages and markets when the British immigrants decided to settle to trade in cotton and indigo in the latter part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Through the next two centuries Calcutta grew rapidly into a global metropolis, the commercial and administrative centre of the British East India Company, and later the capital of British India, attracting several communities of traders, soldiers, missionaries and servicemen. The concentration of trade and industry in Calcutta saw large numbers of people migrating into the capital city from across South Asia, especially from the late eighteenth century, and the city spread out steadily into surrounding areas, absorbing villages and wetlands as it expanded.

Calcutta's population increased from 612,000 in 1881 to 848,000 in 1901, making it the second largest city in the British Empire, after London. By 1931 this figure had grown to over 1.2 million.<sup>1</sup> These figures not only give a sense of the growth in population over these 50 years but also the rate at which the city limits were physically expanding. Suburban areas around Calcutta were being brought under the jurisdiction of the Calcutta municipality, pointing at the rapid urbanisation of these areas and the changing patterns of habitation within the city. It is also important to remember that these figures quoted above only indicate the

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<sup>1</sup> This figure includes the population of adjoining municipalities, that were later brought under city administration. Monidip Chatterjee, "Town Planning in Calcutta: Past, Present and Future," in *Calcutta: The Living City*, vol. 2, ed. Sukanta Chaudhuri (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1990), 135.

population growth within city limits; in addition a large number of people lived in the suburbs and travelled into the city daily for work.

The demographics of this migrant population included workers in textile, shipping, jute and tea industries, traders and shopkeepers, and people who serviced the growing infrastructure of Calcutta, including officials and clerks in the mercantile and administrative offices, bankers, transport workers etc.

The people migrating into Calcutta through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were not only Bengalis from the hinterland and employees of the British East India Company. The city's population also included the Marwari community from western India, Hindi-speaking communities from the Gangetic heartland in northern India, Parsis, Armenians, Jews, Anglo-Indians and the Chinese in fairly large numbers.<sup>2</sup> In addition, floating populations of sailors and soldiers, of various ethnicities, regularly came to Calcutta making it one of the most cosmopolitan cities in Asia:

“The administrative and economic pull of Calcutta had attracted migrants from its hinterland as well as other provinces, giving the city a cosmopolitan character. By 1901, the proportion of Calcuttans speaking Bengali had fallen to 51.3 per cent, while that of Hindustani speakers rose to 36.3 per cent. At the start of the century, two-thirds of the city's population were Hindus; of the rest, 30 percent were Muslims.”<sup>3</sup>

As is apparent from the above quote the turn of the century populace can be categorised along linguistic and religious lines. This multilingual nature of the city's population needs to be kept in mind when studying mass entertainment in the city.

Another basis of differentiation, especially when trying to understand the audience base for urban entertainment in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is not so much caste, or even religion, as class. Class, more often than not,

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of linguistic groups in Calcutta from different regions of South Asia see Pradip Sinha, *Calcutta in Urban History* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1978), 249-64.

<sup>3</sup> Suranjan Das, “The Politics of Agitation: Calcutta 1912-1947” in Chaudhuri, ed., *Calcutta: The Living City* vol. 2, 16

determined the access to education, as well as patterns of habitation and cultural consumption.

As discussed above the growing economy attracted a large number of poor workers from the neighbouring states. There was also a sizeable population of Europeans in the city. By the nineteenth century the landed gentry of Bengal too were migrating to Calcutta while, at the same time, retaining their country homes. And then there was the new mercantile class who had made their money in the colonial regime.

In the growing urban environment of nineteenth century colonial Calcutta, a new class emerged under the tutelage of the British, and as a direct influence of British education and administrative policies. This was the *bhadralok*, the new educated Bengali middle class in colonial Bengal. This class consisted of a range of people that had been educated under the new colonial education system and had varying degrees of fluency in the English language. The *bhadralok* usually worked in the government or mercantile offices as clerks or lower rank officials and hence were reliant on British employment or patronage. Also included in this class were teachers, writers and artists.<sup>4</sup>

Literally translated, the term *bhadralok* means respectable people in Bengali and this group has been variously referred to as the middle class, or the colonial middle class, the literati and the Bengali intelligentsia. In the words of Partha Chatterjee, "...historians inspired by the well-meaning dogmas of American cultural anthropology called it by the name the class had given to itself - the *bhadralok*..."<sup>5</sup>

Schooled in modernist European thought, the *bhadralok* set out trying to rework traditional social and cultural norms through the nineteenth century in an effort to fashion a modern Bengali society, modernise culture and thereby make

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion on the emergence of the *bhadralok* in the nineteenth century see Sumanta Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1989). For a conceptual discussion on the *bhadralok* see Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 35.

themselves equal to the British rulers. Social reformation was on top of the agenda: several laws were introduced, and a number of reformist movements were initiated at this time. The language was modernised, bringing about new forms of literature, music, drama, and art, and a ‘modern’ way of living was introduced – a period that has been termed the Bengal Renaissance. This modernisation of language and cultural forms shaped the cultural geography of Calcutta, greatly impacting twentieth century cultural forms, as discussed below.

However, the *bhadralok* was not a uniformly urban group and continued to retain strong links with the villages, regularly visiting over weekends and annual holidays.

“the educated middle class or *bhadralok* was far from being a purely metropolitan phenomenon cut off from the countryside. Many of its members were first generation immigrants to Calcutta, and there were real, if often diminishing, links with villages through rentier incomes that necessitated at least vacation or Puja visits to rural homes where their womenfolk quite often still resided.”<sup>6</sup>

As a result of these regular visits they often took back urban traditions acquired in the city. Thus village landlords (*zamindars*) would invite performance troupes and *jatra* companies from Calcutta to perform in the villages. Significantly, given that the *bhadralok* was a broad social group, their cultural tastes were, in effect, quite varied. At one end of the spectrum the group could include people rooted in the Bengal countryside, while at the other were the modern, anglicised urban elite. Thus, this was not a homogeneous urban category and consisted of a range of people with varied degrees of urbanity, as well as financial and linguistic capacities.

The multiple communities and classes living in the city also helped to create a fractured audience for the culture and entertainment that evolved in Calcutta through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This fragmented nature of Calcutta’s peoples has not been adequately addressed in discussions on the cinema, which tend to focus on the elite or on subaltern Bengali populaces. It is

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<sup>6</sup> Sumit Sarkar, “Calcutta and the ‘Bengal Renaissance’,” in *Calcutta: The Living City*, vol.1, 95.

crucial to recognise the complex nature of the city's audiences to be able to understand the nature of the cinema in the early years, and I take up this discussion in detail in following chapters.

### **1.1.1 HABITATION PATTERNS**

Another factor that needs to be considered is habitation patterns of migrants into the city, which were dictated by community ties, profession and class. This became a significant factor that impacted the growth of cinema theatres in the city, as discussed at length in Chapter 3.

In 1757, when the new Fort William was built on the banks of the river, several landed Bengali families from the area were relocated to northern parts of the city. In the British plan of the city this was the designated native town. Subsequent waves of Bengali migrants tended to settle down in this area.<sup>7</sup> As a general rule, rural migrants from the hinterland came as casual workers in the urban economy finding work in trade, manufacturing and transport, or as servants in British and Indian households. This form of employment required newcomers to get good references from those already employed. Such references came from kinship, caste, regional, local, religious or linguistic affiliations and resulted in immigrants from similar regions and backgrounds clustering together in both employment and habitation.<sup>8</sup>

An example of this habitation pattern is the community of Hindi and Urdu speaking Momin weavers who migrated from northern India after 1857, to look for work in the docks. They settled down in Ekbalpur and Garden Reach areas, on the south-west borders of Calcutta, close to the Khidirpur docks. Marwaris from western India was another community that came into the city in large numbers, to trade in jute and cotton, throughout the nineteenth century, and especially after the introduction of the railways in the early 1860s. As a trading community they

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<sup>7</sup> P. Thankappan Nair, "The Growth and Development of Old Calcutta," in *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 20; Satyesh C. Chakraborty, "The Growth of Calcutta in the Twentieth Century," in *Calcutta: The Living City*, vol.2, 4.

largely settled in the Barabazar area of the native town in north Calcutta, where the principal trading markets of the city were located. The language spoken by this community is similar to Hindi. Another example of work steering habitation patterns is the development of Bhowanipur in southern Calcutta. Construction of roads opened up the area in the early 1900s and it developed along occupational lines with artisans and workers settling in specific localities (or *paras*) within Bhowanipore. Indian lawyers, “including the most illustrious ones of old Calcutta” also moved to this area because it was close to the courts.<sup>9</sup> With improved transportation, Bengali middle class households started to relocate here in the 1910s and 1920s from the more congested northern areas of the city.

Poorer and mixed communities, that served the white town, like the Anglo-Indians, the Chinese and the poorer Muslims lived in eastern and south-eastern parts of the city: areas that were initially suburban (they came into the city limits in 1901) but close enough to the central part of town.

Finally, the central part of Calcutta was reserved as the European Quarter – the white town or *sahib-para*, as it was known in Bengali (literally, area of the *sahibs* or whites). This part included the administrative and judicial hub around Dalhousie Square, mercantile offices, markets and the residential quarters of the British around Chowringhee. As the city expanded and infrastructure, including roads, public transport, electricity etc. developed, people moved south and south-east. Initially rich Europeans built their garden houses in these districts; later, by the early 1900s, these areas became the residential quarters of the upper income bracket. So Ballyganj and Tollyganj, which primarily had European garden houses in the nineteenth century, saw educated upper and middle class Bengalis move in by the 1920s after the suburban railway connected the area.<sup>10</sup>

This clustering of different communities in neighbourhoods of Calcutta based on work, linguistic, community and class affiliations directly affected the rise of cinema theatres in the city from the 1920s. Thus, as discussed in Chapter 3, a

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<sup>9</sup> Nair, “The Growth and Development of Old Calcutta,” in *Ibid.*, 19

<sup>10</sup> Sinha, *Calcutta in Urban History*, 7-13

cluster of cinema theatres sprung up in Bhowanipur in the 1930s to cater to the new middle class Bengali audience in the area.

These divisions, however, could not be strictly drawn in Calcutta, as they were in many other colonial cities. There were, for instance, pockets of poorer Indian communities across the city, especially the southern parts. An example is Tollyganj, which had a small Muslim community that continued to live in the area after it was settled there in the mid-nineteenth century.

### **1.1.2 LIMITS OF BLACK AND WHITE TOWNS**

The British imagination of colonial Calcutta was that of a central core inhabited by the white populace and the adjoining areas populated by the 'natives', the Indian town. This was the archetypal plan of colonial cities. However, the archetype was not so easily implemented in Calcutta.

According to the original colonial imagination of the city, the administrative and residential hub was developed around the Maidan - the large urban park in the centre of the city - along Dalhousie Square and Chowringhee Road, through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As mentioned above, Bengali families were settled in the northern parts of the city to make way for the new Fort in the late eighteenth century. The land in the areas surrounding the Fort was slowly cleared to build houses. Necessities of colonial urban living, however, demanded that essential amenities be easily available to the residents within accessible limits, hence shops and services prospered around the European town; needless to say the traders and servants were largely Indians. This was also the commercial centre and its proximity to the waterfront was another reason traders set up shop in this area. Since the riverways were the main mode of transport, merchandise could come into the shops easily and the clientele was readily available. As a result, 'natives' had to come and go into the white town to keep it in working order, make it habitable, and keep mercantile offices functioning. Poorer workers from the Indian parts of the city came into the white town everyday to work. As Swati Chattopadhyay says,

“The black and white towns were far from being autonomous entities; the economic, political, and social conditions of colonial culture penetrated the insularity of both towns, although at different levels and to varying degrees. As an examination of the residential pattern of the white town will demonstrate, the story is more complicated.”<sup>11</sup>

The residential plots in the European town were often owned by Indians who built houses specifically to rent out to British families. Later rich Indian families also bought land in this area and moved in. Further, the local workforce working in administrative and mercantile establishments in the central business district often left their families in the villages and lived in shared boarding houses in the central part of the city.<sup>12</sup> As a result segregation of the city was not totally possible.

“...intellectually or commercially no less than physically, Calcutta was never a walled city. Life in Calcutta increasingly induced a modification of old attitudes through free exchange between castes and communities. The physical checks to growth indeed helped in this respect.... Expansion was only possible southwards; but even there, the urge to dwell as close as possible to the seat of power ensured concentration towards the centre.

“The six square miles within the Maratha Ditch thus came to have the world’s highest density of population in that age. It was a heterogeneous population, sinking differences of caste, creed and colour under the sheer compulsion to interact and survive together.”<sup>13</sup>

## 1.2 CULTURE AND ENTERTAINMENT IN THE CITY

This multicultural city had a range of urban entertainment and performance traditions that derived from its unique mix of cultures, both on the streets and in enclosed sites of mass entertainment - myriad traditions that informed the cinema in the twentieth century. Through a study of these we see a trend emerging - even the popular urban entertainments had social commentary and critique built into them. Is this possibly the reason for the importance of the genre of the social in literature, theatre and the cinema of Calcutta in later years?

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<sup>11</sup> Swati Chattopadhyay, *Representing Calcutta: Modernity, nationalism, and the colonial uncanny* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), 76

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. Similar boarding houses thrived in the native town as well

<sup>13</sup> Nair, “The Growth and Development of Old Calcutta,” 20-23

### 1.2.1 LOCAL ENTERTAINMENT

Given the rural roots of much of the Calcutta population many forms of rural popular entertainment found their way onto the streets of the city. Street songs, pantomimes and puppetry were common sights right from the early days of the city. These popular performance traditions, though scorned by the *bhadralok*, often reflected contemporary urban culture and experiences. Despite the attempted separation of so-called high art forms like the theatre from popular elements, the latter found its way into Bengali Public Theatre in no small measure. Sumanta Banerjee notes that folk culture,

“was appreciated by both the upper class patrons and the lower orders even in the new metropolis of Calcutta in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries. Folklore from which Calcutta’s later street literature and popular culture derived was essentially a shared experience. There was not yet any sharp distinction of high and low.”<sup>14</sup>

Among the many folk and urban performance forms that were popular in Calcutta in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were the *jatra*, *shong*, *khemta*, *kirtan*, *panchali*, *kabigan*, *akhdai* and the *half-akhdai*.<sup>15</sup> Although these forms largely originated in rural Bengal, urban variants emerged, assimilating ideas that were relevant to urban living and experiences. Notably music was an intrinsic part of many of these forms, including the *jatra*, *panchali*, *kabigan*, *akhdai* and *kirtan*. The *kabigan* (literally, musical poetry) especially became popular among the new middle class in Calcutta in the early nineteenth century. Some of the most celebrated *kobials* (poets/singers) were social commentators like Bhola Moira and Anthony Firingee. They commanded a wide public following with their songs of the challenges of everyday urban living.

*Kabigan* and *jatra* were held in the courtyards of the wealthy inhabitants of Calcutta. These were not public or ticketed performances; however attendance to these events was not limited to the rich and the famous. Friends and their families were invited to these performances, as were extended family, acquaintances,

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<sup>14</sup> Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets*, 83

<sup>15</sup> For a more detailed discussion on these see Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets*. Also see Smarani Mukherjee, “Moments of Modernity: Cinema and Social Response in Bengal Between the Two World Wars” (Ph.D, Calcutta: Jadavpur University, 2005)

servants, as well as acquaintances of the servants. As a result, even relatively poorer sections of the Bengali community were able to attend these shows. In a sense, this practice was a continuation of village traditions where the entire village would gather in the house of the landowner (*zamindar*), or in temple yards and public festival sites in the village commons to watch the *jatra*, the *kirtan* or the *kabigan*. This viewing practice later spilled into the travelling cinema shows held in these very same venues. Through several decades of the twentieth century travelling cinema companies, like Hiralal Sen's, would be invited to screen in village grounds or in the courtyards of the *zamindar's* house where the entire village would gather to see the screenings.

Another popular performance form, the *shong*, transmuted from its rural origins into a subaltern urban art form. The *shong* (literally, the comic/clown) involved groups of performers with painted bodies dressed as character types, or gods, who would roam the streets, singing and miming. This satirical poetic form, in particular, had a strong influence on Bengali language and literature.

Some autobiographies that are not so well known add a touch of personal flavour to our knowledge of urban culture and reinforce the porosity of class and cultural divisions in the city. These writings serve to highlight the wide range of cultural influences that even the protected middle classes encountered in the city. Actor Ahindra Choudhury, for instance, describes the several performance practices and the spectacles of the city of his childhood, in the early 1900s, especially during local festivals like the *neel* and *charak*. He mentions seeing *shongs* at religious processions in his childhood, mesmerised by their costumes, masks and make-up, soaking in the performance – the miming, the music, the doggerel (*chhora*) and the parodies.

“The *shongs* of the Neel festival left a remarkable imprint in my memory. I can clearly visualise those extraordinary gestures and performance that I observed as a child. In the morning... there were different costumes and parodies. In the evenings it was the turn of the Shiva-Parvati masquerades. They would dress up as Shiva and Parvati and sing songs and doggerels.

Accompanying them was concert [band] music, along with traditional songs of the wedding of Shiva and Parvati.”<sup>16</sup> [Translation Mine]

Choudhury also mentions puppet theatre during the Raas festival where the puppeteers enacted stories – mostly *pauranic* (mythological), sometimes social. From these descriptions it appears that various forms of social commentary were an intrinsic part of the so-called lower art forms, and not merely the bastion of the *bhadralok* in the novels and dramas of the late nineteenth century. I would suggest that the *bhadralok* merely tried to codify a model for an ideal cultural form that would reflect what to them appeared to be an ideal society and help to educate the ‘uncultured masses’.

The other spectacular sights and sounds that fascinated the young Choudhury were street pageants, caravans with bands, festive processions, and the introduction of the electric tram.<sup>17</sup> There appears to have been no dearth of visual and aural spectacle on the streets of late nineteenth century Calcutta and, clearly, white-skinned women were an attraction even before the Anglo-Indian actresses of the silent screen. Wedding processions of the wealthy were particular attractions for the people of Calcutta. The groom, in all his splendour, was accompanied with lights, Jewish girls hired for the occasion and *gorabajna* i.e. British military bands hired from the Fort. Sometimes the Jewish girls were replaced with boy-actors from the *jatra*, dressed as young girls.<sup>18</sup>

From all accounts pageantry and gaiety was not limited to the Indian parts of the city. At Christmas the roads in the *sahibpara* were filled with *sahibs* and *mems* (white ladies) in festive attire. By evening the roads were taken over by soldiers and sailors. The revelry and the lure of lights was unparalleled to the child Ahin. Buildings along Chowringhee and other streets in the European quarter were lit up during Christmas and on the occasion of special celebrations like the arrival of the

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<sup>16</sup> Ahindra Choudhury, *Nijere Haraye Khunji*, vol. 1, 11.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 12

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 13

British royal family. The people of the city thronged the roads to see the lights during these events.<sup>19</sup>

Choudhury especially recalls the spectacle of the first electric tram on the city roads. Electric trams were introduced in Calcutta in 1902 - the first such electric tram in Asia. He mentions the excitement and the anticipation surrounding the arrival of this new machine. People thronged the roadsides to catch a glimpse of it and speculated on what it would look like, whether it would be travelling on the lines laid on the ground, or on the overhead wires, suspended in the air!

These accounts bring to us a sense of shared excitement at the spectacle of modern city life and the attractions of street entertainment at the end of nineteenth century Calcutta. They lend these encounters an element of the fantastical in the introduction of new technologies on city streets. The fantastical was also visibly present in the Bengali and Parsi stages of late nineteenth century Calcutta and was an important feature of the variety entertainment in the European town. Elsewhere I have argued that it is in this space of the spectacular, the illusory and the fantastical that film was introduced when it first appeared on Calcutta stages.<sup>20</sup>

Significantly the thrills and exhilarations of city life, its sights and sounds, and popular amusements also appear to be available to, and enjoyed by all, regardless of class backgrounds. Choudhury belonged to the *bhadralok* and grew up in respectable parts of the city, in the native town in north Calcutta. That he had ready access to these popular entertainment forms on the streets of his childhood points to the continued persistence of folk and popular culture within *bhadralok* culture at the turn of the century, even at a time when the *bhadralok* were seeking to distance themselves from 'crude' and pre-modern cultural forms.

“A schism in this cultural homogeneity began only from the middle of the nineteenth century when, with the spread of English education and western cultural ideas, a new generation of educated *bhadraloks* appeared on the scene. Determined to distinguish themselves from the lower orders, they

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 13-14. Choudhury gives a detailed account of these memorable events.

<sup>20</sup> See Ranita Chatterjee, “Peripheral Encounters: Early Cinema, Advertising and Attractions in Calcutta,” in *Peripheral Early Cinema*, edited by François de la Bretèque et al., Perpignan: University of Perpignan Press, 2010, 171-182

sought to exclude the traditional folk culture and their later urban variations from the common heritage.”<sup>21</sup>

The *bhadralok*, in their attempts at creating a ‘modern’, yet local culture for themselves, were entirely taken up by the idea of a Bengali theatre that was modelled on the European theatre popular with British audiences in Calcutta.<sup>22</sup>

### **1.2.2 THE THEATRE IN CALCUTTA**

The theatre was the first organised form of mass entertainment in Calcutta that led to the building of permanent sites for entertainment and ticketed performances that audiences paid to see. This directly influenced the rise of the cinema as an urban entertainment form. The cinema inherited several practices from the theatre and these will be discussed through the thesis. Bengali cinema in particular had close links with the Bengali Public Theatre, borrowing stories, writers, directors, performers and exhibition practices, and thus the Bengali Public Theatre is discussed in detail below.

The theatre in Calcutta started with the introduction of European playhouses from the mid-eighteenth century for local British expats. The first playhouse in Calcutta opened in 1753. Many more theatres opened and shut down over the next hundred years. These included the *Calcutta Theatre* (1775- ?), the *Chowringhee Theatre* (1813-1839) and the Sans Souci (1839- ?).

By the mid nineteenth century the white town had spawned a flourishing entertainment business, initially catering to the European audience that lived in the vicinity. Expatriate British residents of Calcutta, in their eagerness to maintain a typical English lifestyle, tried to import British entertainment and culture into Calcutta. Thus travelling theatre and vaudeville groups from Europe and America regularly visited the city over the winter months to perform in these theatres, and local theatre companies were formed.

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<sup>21</sup> Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets*, 83

<sup>22</sup> Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 7-8.

“These companies enjoyed a steady inflow of experienced, even renowned actors and actresses, sometimes from the London stage: ... At first the audience was exclusively European – even the ushers and doorkeepers at the *Calcutta Theatre* were Englishmen – but Indians gained entry from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the English theatre became a haunt, and sometimes a source of serious interest, of the emerging English-educated Bengalis.”<sup>23</sup>

Soon this set of “emerging English-educated Bengalis” started to express a growing desire for a home-grown theatre in the vernacular. By the latter half of the nineteenth century concerted efforts by the *bhadralok* saw the rise of Bengali Public Theatre which middle class Bengalis regularly visited.<sup>24</sup>

Another significant influence on the cinema of Calcutta was that of the Parsi stage. While Parsi Theatre’s influence on Bombay cinema has been much-discussed,<sup>25</sup> its influence on Calcutta cinema remains to be adequately acknowledged. The largest producer of films in Calcutta, in the silent and early talkie era, was the Parsi-owned Madan Theatres, who also owned Parsi theatre companies in the city. The Madan films were intrinsically linked to the Parsi stage, as discussed in the following chapter (see sections on *Savitri* and *Indra Sabha* in particular).

### 1.2.3 BENGALI PUBLIC THEATRE

From the 1830s rich Bengali gentlemen built home theatres in their Calcutta homes and staged plays in Bengali. However, these performances were private, only meant for special invitees, usually other rich gentlemen, and excluded the less privileged members of the *bhadralok*. Soon theatre societies and clubs sprung up in north Calcutta.

“The rich man’s private theatre provided the incentive for ‘amateur’ theatres set up by ‘societies’ and ‘clubs’ among the stage-struck middle class.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Kironmoy Raha, “Calcutta Theatre 1835-1944,” in *Calcutta: The Living City*, vol. 1, 186.

<sup>24</sup> Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets*, 187

<sup>25</sup> See Somnath Gupt *The Parsi Theatre: Its Origins and Development*, trans. and ed. Kathryn Hansen (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2005).

<sup>26</sup> Raha, “Calcutta Theatre 1835-1944” in *Calcutta: the Living City*, vol. 1, 188

These ‘societies’ and ‘clubs’ too were private but allowed for wider participation of young educated men from the middle class. Many members of these amateur clubs went on to play a crucial role in the Public Theatre in later years. However, the rapid growth of the city and the swelling middle classes led to an increased demand for a public entertainment that was open to all.

The first commercial performance of a Bengali play was by the *National Theatre* on December 7, 1872. The play was *Nildarpan*, a socio-political play, based on the exploitation of indigo farmers by the British. It was performed on a purpose-built stage on a rented courtyard in one of the north Calcutta mansions. By next April a breakaway group staged Michael Madhusudan’s<sup>27</sup> *Sharmishtha* in Opera House, an English theatre located on Lindsay Street, in the heart of the white town. The play, expectedly, incurred losses, as a Bengali play in a primarily British locality could only attract a small number of people, especially given the lack of public transportation in 1873, coupled with the policies of segregation which helped to keep away the less affluent, and non-English speaking sections of this population from Opera House. The group soon wound up and started to tour the countryside with the play.<sup>28</sup>

This example is important in the parallels that it has with cinema, a few decades later, and illustrates the close relationship between sites of entertainment and their audiences. It also highlights the practice of theatre groups touring the districts with the play after the Calcutta runs – a practice that was promptly picked up by the cinema when itinerant film exhibitors travelled the countryside after showing in theatres in Calcutta. The Opera House was transformed into one of Calcutta’s premiere cinema theatres in the 1910s and will appear again in this thesis in subsequent chapters.

By August 1873, the first permanent Bengali playhouse was built on Beadon Street, in the northern part of the city and others soon came up, creating a theatre

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<sup>27</sup> Michael Madhusudan Dutt was at the forefront of modernising Bengali literature. Deeply influenced by English and French classics he started writing in English but then switched to Bengali. His oeuvre includes drama and epic poems, taking on subjects from mythology and Sanskrit classics. The plays were written specifically to be performed on public stage.

<sup>28</sup> Raha, “Calcutta Theatre 1835-1944” in *Calcutta: the Living City*, vol. 1, 189

district in the native town. Within the next three decades Bengali Public Theatre became immensely popular among Calcuttans, drawing a wide range of audiences, from across the *bhadralok*.

“Bengali theatre established its acting style, production methods and managerial structure in the short space of three decades. By then, it had become an important medium not only of entertainment but also for the propagation of views and beliefs among the Bengali gentry and middle class. This was reflected in the coverage it received in both English and Bengali newspapers, and the hot debates it provoked in most Bengali households....”<sup>29</sup>

The two direct influences on Bengali theatre were the divergent forms of the indigenous *jatra* and the English stage. English educated elite Bengalis looked down on the *jatra* and modelled the emerging Bengali theatre on the English theatre, borrowing from European narrative techniques and structures and favouring the proscenium stage over the traditional *jatra* stage.<sup>30</sup> However, they could not wholly deny or reject the influence of the *jatra*.

“...it [Bengali theatre] could scarcely have taken root as firmly and rapidly as it did if it had been wholly an alien transplant....

“Tastes nourished by the *jatra* served to dictate the themes, treatment, dialogue and acting style of Western-style Bengali theatre.”<sup>31</sup>

Thus, already, the Bengali stage imbibed a range of performance styles, often conflicting. This continuity with local performance traditions helped to extend the audience for the Bengali theatre especially amongst sections of the audience that retained close ties with the villages:

“What Girish Ghosh<sup>32</sup> and others succeeded in doing was to fuse these contrary components into a popular form of entertainment and mimetic art.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 190

<sup>30</sup> Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets*, 162-6

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 186

<sup>32</sup> Girish Ghosh (1844-1912) was an iconic figure of old Bengali theatre and the most successful.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 192

This residue of popular elements within modernist forms like the Bengali Public Theatre can help us to look ahead to the presence of populist elements even within the so-called elitist films of New Theatres in the 1930s, as discussed in Chapter 2.

The plays were usually either based on religious and mythological figures, or had quasi-historical themes, or dealt with social concerns. Overtly political plays were few and far between, primarily due to the introduction of the Dramatic Performances Act in 1876, and strict censorship by the colonial police. While some new plays were written for the Bengali stage initially most were adaptations and translations from European and Sanskrit drama. Many successful *jatras* too were adapted for the stage. To meet the increasing demand novels, poems and short stories of modern Bengali writers were also dramatised. A few playwrights emerged in the late nineteenth century - they wrote in Bengali, specifically for the stage, but often the themes were complex and the language too literary for the average theatre-goer to follow. These plays were more successful in print than they were on the stage:

“What the stage demanded was a simple formula to satisfy the middle-class thirst for entertainment and vicarious emotion. These were best provided by Girishchandra Ghosh, arguably the most towering figure in the history of old Bengali theatre. Among his eighty-odd plays are farces and burlesques, musicals and fantasies, social drama, and plays based on religious and quasi-historical figures like those from the Hindu epics.”<sup>34</sup>

This range of genres and the introduction of popular elements in the narrative forms of the theatre is also reflected in the diverse genre-formation in early feature film in Calcutta.

Initially, the plays were lengthy and continued from late evening till early morning. Saturday was theatre day originally, and then the Sunday matinee was introduced. With the theatre gaining in popularity the length of the plays were shortened and an additional mid-week performance was introduced on Thursdays. Short skits, pantomimes and variety shows were included in the programme, to attract less erudite audiences. Among the several key personalities who changed

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 191

the face of Bengali Public Theatre in the late nineteenth century was A. N. Dutt, who started Classic Theatre in 1897. Dutt's plays gave new life to a dwindling Calcutta stage by bringing in popular audiences to the theatre.

“Within a few years he made it the most popular theatre in the city, a place of uninhibited fun,... he was an innovator in production methods, and not unmindful of the serious side of theatre – as borne out by his pioneering theatre journals, *Saurabh* and *Rangalaya*.”<sup>35</sup>

The dynamic Dutt employed several strategies to draw in the masses to the theatre with attractive handbills and advertisements, free gifts and lucky draws. He included real animals and birds on stage and trick scenes within his plays.<sup>36</sup>

“...The great achievement was to create ‘magical’ effects: actors vanishing through trap doors, toy trains trundling across the stage, or ‘close combat in chariots’. No doubt they drew crowds, as more sophisticated gimmicks do now....”<sup>37</sup>

Dutt also included dance performances, magic shows and, by 1898, films in the theatre programme. These schemes helped to bring in popular audiences to the theatre and consequently introduced the moving image to middle and lower middle class Bengali audiences. Classic Theatre thus played a major role in creating the ‘cinema habit’<sup>38</sup> amongst local audiences. The other key person in this joint endeavour was Hiralal Sen who not only showed films at the Classic Theatre but also filmed scenes from several Classic plays, including the immensely popular play, *Alibaba and the Forty Thieves*, to screen them at both the Classic, and to other audiences through Sen's travelling cinema. This will be discussed at length in later chapters.<sup>39</sup>

Thus it can be concluded that the Bengali Public Theatre was the first organised public entertainment for Bengali audiences. It created an infrastructure for mass

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 192

<sup>36</sup> Sushil Kumar Mukherjee, *The Story of the Calcutta Theatres: 1753-1980*, (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi, 1982), 106-107

<sup>37</sup> Raha, “Calcutta Theatre 1835-1944” in *Calcutta: the Living City*, vol. 1, 193

<sup>38</sup> ICC. This is a term used regularly through the Report and has been taken up by film scholars studying the period, like Bhaumik. I will continue to use this term throughout the thesis.

<sup>39</sup> A. N. Dutt's diaries say that these plays were filmed. Personal conversations with Devajit Bandyopadhyay, April 2008.

entertainment, fostered an entertainment habit among the people of the city, and created a demand for regular public entertainment that was open to anyone who could afford to pay and was not just the preserve of the rich.

The efforts at creating a modern public entertainment for a rapidly modernising city and its audiences brought about many changes to traditional performance forms and practices. The theatre spawned stars, many of whom went on to perform in film. Thus arguably it was the theatre that gave rise to the star system, a system that was consciously mobilised by publicists of the cinema to draw audiences right from the first years, as seen in the publicity of the Madan films, discussed in Chapter 2.

Another significant change was of a more aesthetic nature. The forced frontal view of the European proscenium theatre brought about a change in perceptual habits of the viewer. Indigenous performance forms did not necessarily have a fixed frontal relationship between the stage and the audience as in European proscenium theatre. Even those forms that had a seated audience like the *jatra*, *kabigan* or the *kirtan* had the audience seated all around the stage allowing a close and intimate relationship between the stage, the actors and the audience. Other subaltern and urban forms like the *shong* and similar peripatetic entertainment forms would pass through city streets and allowed the spectator to enter the performance at various points. These forms thus allowed for multiple perspectives.

Perhaps the mobile experience of watching a performance had become a habit with local audiences not schooled into the viewing habits of the English proscenium theatre. The fixed frontal relationship that required the individual spectator to focus silently on the action on the stage, or the screen, interfered with established viewing habits in village courtyards, or on the streets of the metropolis. Thus, when nineteenth and twentieth century commentators and actors complain of unruly audiences of the theatre and the cinema who walked in and out of the theatre and talked through performances, they are unwittingly pointing to a continuation of viewing practices from city streets and village fairgrounds into the theatre and the cinema.

Along with establishing a wider audience for mass public entertainment the structure of finance also changed with the establishment of the Bengali Public Theatre. While the wealthy continued to make donations, the theatre benefited from the increased patronage of the new, burgeoning middle class and, by the early 1900s, were increasingly managed by businessmen.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, while Bengali theatre started within feudal structures of patronage, with its formalisation into a public entertainment form it moved to more capitalist structures by the turn of the century – structures that the modern entertainment form of the cinema inherited and the likes of Madan and the Marwari entrepreneurs used in establishing the film studios of latter decades. The success of the Bengali stage also created an audience, or rather audiences, for urban entertainment and formalised codes of viewing – all features that the cinema capitalised on in the early decades of the twentieth century.

#### **1.2.4 LITERATURE OF THE PEOPLES**

The other cultural form that had a strong impact on Bengali cinema was literature. The nineteenth century saw a spurt of Bengali literature in Calcutta. The influence of English education, the spread of printing presses along with the consciousness of creating a ‘modern’ literature in Bengali among the *bhadralok* led to many educated Bengalis taking to writing. As mentioned above, a ‘modern’ Bengali literature was a key outcome of the so-called Bengal Renaissance. By the late nineteenth century novels of Bankimchandra Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore, the poems and plays of Tagore and Michael Madhusudan Dutt, the literary plays of Dwijendralal Ray and Kshirodeprasad Vidyavinode were read widely by the educated, and works of these celebrated writers were frequently adapted for the Public Theatre, and later the cinema.

Contrary to popular belief, however, there was great interest in popular fiction, in thrillers and detective novels, amongst the growing reading public in Calcutta. The growth of a vernacular prose along with the fairly wide scale access to

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<sup>40</sup> Raha, “Calcutta Theatre 1835-1944” in *Calcutta: the Living City*, vol. 1, 189

printing in the nineteenth century fostered a market for popular fiction in vernacular languages. While the nineteenth century Bengali novels, poems and plays were celebrated in contemporary literary journals, access to printing also saw the rise of popular writing, notably the Bat-tala publications – cheap books sold under the banyan tree - of farces, satires, thrillers, popular plays, Arabian Nights fantasies etc.<sup>41</sup> Also popular were cheap American thrillers, detective stories and romances. These were ridiculed by literary critics but were very popular amongst common people, especially women, students and the semi-literate middle classes who often found the language and ideas in the high literature too complex.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps this interest in popular literature gives us some clues into the later interest in popular films.

### **1.3 NINETEENTH CENTURY CIRCUITS: Colonial Entertainment, Trade Networks and the Arrival of Screen Technology**

As is clear from the discussions above several cultural forms and entertainment troupes travelled to Calcutta through colonial routes. What becomes apparent from this broad scan of cultural forms in the nineteenth century city is the growing significance of the arrivals via transnational circuits of entertainment. Books, performance forms, theatrical groups travelled into Calcutta regularly catering to the European diaspora and elite Indians living in the city and left an imprint. In addition to the theatre performances, there were several popular entertainment forms that also addressed the less refined of Calcutta's British populace, like the soldiers and the sailors. These included the more lowbrow variety shows, musicals and circus performances, held in smaller theatres across the white town and in makeshift tents on the Maidan, the large urban park in the centre of the city. It is clear from newspaper advertisements that travelling troupes of entertainers from Britain, Europe, Australia and America regularly arrived in Calcutta with these shows, forming a regular entertainment circuit.<sup>43</sup> By the late nineteenth

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<sup>41</sup> Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets*, 121-3; 177-185.

<sup>42</sup> Mukherjee, "Moments of Modernity," 64.

<sup>43</sup> See advertisement of Wilson's Circus, which travelled to the city from Australia every winter, *The Statesman*, January 1885, reprinted in Ranabir Ray Choudhury, ed., *Early Calcutta Advertisements*, Nachiketa Publications (Calcutta: 1992), 563

century travelling shows from India were also performing on the Maidan,<sup>44</sup> suggesting that by this time the Maidan entertainments also catered to sections of the local Indian populace. As discussed in the following chapters the cinema was also added on as an additional variety in this plethora of popular entertainments in the city by the turn of the century. The cinema arrived via the same circuits that these travelling troupes arrived in Calcutta in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; while cinematic technology arrived through mercantile routes charted by nineteenth century screen technologies like photography and the magic lantern. Ultimately, in the case of the cinema, these two circuits - of entertainment and technology - merged.

A variety of screen media proliferated in India through the nineteenth century, and a cursory study of turn of the century newspapers reveals that these technologies made their way into South Asia quite soon after their inventions in the West.<sup>45</sup> Many of these new technologies arrived with travelling showmen, adventurers and collectors, who occasionally brought with them lanterns, photographs and other visual imagery collected from their travels, to be exhibited as part of their variety shows. These arrivals resulted in exhibition of screen media, both in private shows as well as commercial exploitation in public sites of variety entertainment.

But regular import links were also set up, paving the way for the arrival of film. Mahadevan stresses the role of the agency houses in importing new visual technologies like photography and the magic lantern. Based in the Indian metros, agency houses were involved in general trade and financial services to the British residents and later, the Indian elite. The early photographic companies grew out of these agency houses, especially the ones that were involved in general trade and retail, offering the British population, and later the Indian elite, imported goods ranging from pharmaceuticals, optical instruments, precision instruments, food

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 558.

<sup>45</sup> See for instance advertisements in *The Statesman*, of a Cinematograph screening in January 1897; a Biograph screening in Opera House, February 1900. Also see below for a detailed discussion.

and perishables. By the 1870s, with the privatisation of trade, foreign firms started to appoint sole agents in India.<sup>46</sup>

Film histories and biographies (both Bengali and English sources) point out that several of the earliest pioneers of the cinema were involved in the photography trade – as agents and/or photographers, including Hiralal Sen in Calcutta, Phalke and Bhatvadekar in Bombay, and R. Venkiah Nayudu in Madras.<sup>47</sup> As we will see in Chapter 2, apart from the prominent pioneers several other personalities with a background in photography also joined the film industry.

But the role of the general agent in early cinema has not been dwelled upon in great detail in film history, except for Mahadevan's discussion. As I argue in the following chapter sole agents like J. F. Madan had a strong connection with the early film trade. Madan operated as a sole agent for a number of foreign firms, and had a flourishing import and retail business in Calcutta, Bombay, and across South Asia, in addition to being the official supplier to the British army.<sup>48</sup> By the early 1900s Madan's agency had diversified into importing films and film equipment from London<sup>49</sup> This was nothing extraordinary: several film companies in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras started out as dealers in film equipment. Significantly though, throughout its entire period of involvement with film circulation and production, spanning over three decades, the Madan group retained its original identity of the agency-house and continued dealing in film equipment.

This established mercantile link between colonial India and Britain served as a conduit for novel technologies to arrive in India very soon on the heels of their introduction in Britain. Indeed, photography and other nineteenth century imaging technologies like the X-Ray reached India within a year of their

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<sup>46</sup> Mahadevan, "Traffic in Technologies," 68-71.

<sup>47</sup> See Asghar, *Hiralal Sen*; Chatterjee, *Aar Rekhona Aadhare*; Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*; Hughes, "Is There Anyone Out There?" 42; Mahadevan, "Traffic in Technologies," 272-3 et. al.

<sup>48</sup> Homai N. Modi, "Jamshedji Madan – Pioneer of the Film Industry in India," in *The Parsis in Western India: 1818 – 1920*, ed., Nawaz B. Mody (Bombay: Allied Publishers Ltd., 1998). Homai Modi is the great granddaughter of J.F. Madan.

<sup>49</sup> See newspapers advertisements in *The Statesman* and TOI.

discovery/invention.<sup>50</sup> Access to these imaging technologies, however, was limited to the elite that consisted of the European diaspora and the Indian elite based in Calcutta.

Thus, as Hughes, Mahadevan et. al. stress, the arrival of film technologies in India is impossible to be encapsulated within a one-off event - the Lumière screenings in Watson's Hotel, Bombay. Rather, this needs to be understood within a larger processual context of cultural and technological arrivals and exchanges within established colonial frameworks. The demands of maintaining a colony established routes for trade, travel and communication within the British Empire worldwide. These networks functioned through several ports across the Indian Ocean, including African, Indian and S. E. Asian ports, and these ports became essential nodes for the network to operate. It is through these networks that screen technologies arrived across the Indian Ocean, and the port-cities become crucial to the growth and sustenance of the cinema. As will be discussed in the following chapters, the major port-cities of the Indian peninsula – Bombay, Colombo, Madras, Calcutta and Rangoon – all grew into major centres of cinema through the early twentieth century. Bombay, Madras and Calcutta in particular developed into robust film industries by the end of the 1930s.

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<sup>50</sup> Mahadevan, "Traffic in Technologies," 77-8.

## CHAPTER 2

### FILMS: THE CALCUTTA STORY

*“Since its inception, Bengali Cinema has been producing rebels, out to break away from the beaten track, starting new vogues and making people conscious about their social responsibilities. If one were to mention four outstanding names among filmmakers of India during the Thirties and Forties, three would belong to Bengal – P.C Barua, Debaki Bose and Nitin Bose...”<sup>1</sup>*

The first film event in Calcutta has been the subject of much debate in film history, unlike the much celebrated first film event in Bombay – the Lumière screening on July 7, 1896, by Marius Sestier. Yet, this debate signals a rich history of arrivals of itinerant showmen in Calcutta, with an assortment of film technologies through 1897 and 1898 – arrivals that traversed distinct circuits that are not known to have overlapped with Bombay.

The different routes by which film arrived and travelled in can also be observed two decades later, in the confident assertions of the *Times of India*'s cinema columnist, that no films had been produced in and around Bombay by April 1917. At the same time, this very same columnist is aware of Madan's 1917 film, "*Harishchandra*", made in Calcutta.<sup>2</sup> This ignorance of the legendary screenings of Phalke's celebrated films in Bombay, the city that this columnist lived and worked in, while publishing details of a competing film from Calcutta, is suggestive of the diverse circuits that film, and film culture, circulated in India without crossing paths.

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<sup>1</sup> Bagishwar Jha, "Patriarchs of Indian Cinema: J.F.Madan and B.N.Sircar," in *Seventy Years of Indian Cinema, 1913-1983*, ed. T. M. Ramachandran (Bombay: Cinema India International, 1985), 81.

<sup>2</sup> See quote in the Prologue to this thesis.

While by 1917 the cinema was firmly ensconced across South Asia it is entirely plausible that sections of the audience were unaware of other circuits and occurrences. The TOI catered to a British and elite Indian readership who were not the audience of Phalke's films – at least in these early years. However, unlike this contemporary journalist, the received history of 'Indian cinema' has largely forgotten the Madan film of 1917 even while privileging Phalke's contributions, and according him the mythical status of founding father of 'Indian cinema'. This is encapsulated in Barnouw and Krishnaswamy's definitive volume, *Indian Film*, which constructs a historical narrative of 'Indian cinema' that is, in effect, centred on developments in Bombay.

Like all good histories, *Indian Film* starts with a reference to the iconic film event in India – the screening of the Cinématographe at Watson's Hotel on July 7, 1896, by Lumière operator Marius Sestier. The authors list a few other names of people and apparatus that showed in Bombay in 1897-8, primarily based on research in the TOI. The entry on the beginnings of film in Calcutta, however, is fairly vague in comparison:

“While Bombay was receiving these, Calcutta, at this time the capital of British India, was also visited by various expeditions, including that of a Mr. Stevens who is said to have exhibited short items at the Star Theatre after stage performances.”<sup>3</sup>

Through the rest of this section of the book it is clear that Barnouw and Krishnaswamy's focus lies in Bombay with the bulk of the references to Calcutta taken from secondary material. The *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema* too does not give any names for the first film showings and has a simple entry for 1897: “First films shown in Calcutta and Madras.”<sup>4</sup> *Indian Film* and other available literature focusses on what they deem to be key personalities that made a mark in the history of 'Indian cinema', in keeping with older trends of writing history. These

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<sup>3</sup> Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, 5-6

<sup>4</sup> EIC

also typically focus on film production,<sup>5</sup> mythologising Dadasaheb Phalke's achievements as the pioneer figure of 'Indian cinema'.<sup>6</sup>

The production of early films in Calcutta continues to find brief but periodic mention in these histories: thus Hiralal Sen is mentioned briefly as a pioneer from Calcutta, followed by Dhiren Ganguly who made several films in the 1920s, and then the narrative moves on to the celebrated Calcutta studio, New Theatres, in the 1930s, and its famous directors, Pramathesh Barua, Debaki Bose et al. Bengali sources flesh out the history of Bengali cinema in a little more detail, although these too continue to focus on perceived firsts. Further much of this material is anecdotal and written in a popular tone, without cross-references and citations, and often reproducing stories circulating within the city, thereby rendering these into urban myths, most notably the foundational myth of the bioscope in Calcutta.<sup>7</sup>

This chapter seeks to enquire into these myriad and varying histories, reconstructing what we know from the existing literature on the emergence of cinema in Calcutta and then putting together a narrative based on all available sources. Read together, this detailed narrative of the industry reveals a picture of a vibrant industry in the making. In the process, the chapter questions the received narrative and enquires into the processes of film historiography and what gets written in and written out of grand narratives of film history. This is not the easiest of tasks given that the majority of the films do not survive. Further, the selective processes of film historiography, and of film archiving over time, have resulted in much material disappearing and the material that remains are really those that have been deemed sufficiently important to be preserved for posterity.

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<sup>5</sup> This trend is not limited to Indian film histories – virtually all national cinema histories have privileged the history of production, rather than exhibition and distribution.

<sup>6</sup> Phalke's first film, *Raja Harishchandra*, was released in Bombay, 1913. See for example Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*; Shah, *The Indian Film*; Rangoonwalla, *Seventy Five Years of Indian Cinema* et al.

<sup>7</sup> Film was commonly referred to as bioscope in Bengal and hence I use the term as a synonym for film in discussions of early cinema. However, the Bioscope was also a specific screen technology exhibited in Calcutta along with other screen technologies like the Cinematograph, as I discuss below.

A further problem is that filmographies in Calcutta and Bombay are based on a linguistic logic, especially the sound films. Thus, Bengali language films are found in Bengali filmographies, leaving out films in other languages that were produced by the Calcutta studios, of which there were a sizeable number, as I discovered during this research. On the other hand, filmographies of Bombay films do not include films produced in other production centres like Calcutta, even if the films were in Hindi, Urdu or Hindustani.<sup>8</sup> Thus, it is rather challenging to get a good grasp of the entire range of films produced in Calcutta and, as a result, makes the difficult task of studying the history of the Madans, for instance, even more complex.<sup>9</sup>

Through fresh research on film production in the city, the chapter starts with a reconstruction of the existing literature on the history of Calcutta cinema and then proceeds to add on to this received narrative, thereby interrogating the received history of cinema in Calcutta.

The chapter is broadly divided into three sections that correspond to three epochs in the emergence of the Calcutta industry: (i) the early phase (1897-1917), (ii) the rise of feature film production, roughly between the years 1917 to 1928 and (iii) the studio era roughly corresponding to 1929 through the 1930s. While the progression of the chapter is broadly chronological, I have refrained from precisely dating each section as older practices and processes spill over into the following era, often continuing simultaneously with newer practices. A good example of this is the introduction of sound. Sound production starts in 1931 but silent films continue to be produced in Calcutta (and Bombay) up to 1934.

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<sup>8</sup> The language of Bombay cinema has been variously ascribed as Hindi, Urdu and Hindustani. In this thesis I prefer to use Hindi/Urdu rather than Hindustani as the generic term to refer to films made in these languages, and produced not only in Bombay but also in Calcutta as discussed later in Chapter 2.

<sup>9</sup> The exception is Dharamsey's silent filmography in Chhabria et.al. eds., *Light of Asia: Indian Silent Cinema*, that also lists the producer.

## 2.1 THE CONTESTED SPACE OF RECEIVED FILM HISTORY

According to received film history, the cinema was introduced to Calcutta by a Mr. Stephens, alternatively known as Prof. Stevenson. Stephens/Stevenson<sup>10</sup> first showed the Cinematograph at the Star Theatre around 1897/1898.<sup>11</sup> This is where Hiralal Sen the “Pioneer of Indian Cinema from Calcutta”<sup>12</sup> allegedly saw his first film. Soon Sen started to make shorts, shooting scenes from the theatre, under Stevenson’s guidance. Thus was formed “the first Indian bioscope company under the name of ‘The Royal Bioscope Company’ in 1898.”<sup>13</sup> Sen continued showing films in theatres in Calcutta, and also turned into a travelling exhibitor, touring the Bengal countryside with his company.

Meanwhile, the official narrative continues, a Parsi businessman, J. F. Madan, started a tent show in the early 1900s, and by the end of the decade he had built a permanent cinema in Calcutta. This was the first permanent cinema theatre in all of South Asia. Madan also produced the first feature length film at the end of the teens, and continued to produce a large number of films through the silent era; however these were not considered very noteworthy productions. The first Bengali film, *Bilet Pherat/ England Returned* (Indo-British Film Company) was released in 1921. While the film has not survived, its memory has: thus in a listing of key moments in the history of ‘Indian cinema’ Rangoonwalla writes:

“The first consciousness of a social subject with contemporary background was found in ‘England Returned’ made in 1921 by Calcutta’s Dhiren Ganguly.”<sup>14</sup>

The film and its director, Dhiren Ganguly, popularly called D. G., has been eulogised by the literature possibly because the film dealt with a subject that was allied to nationalist interests: the search for an identity that was modern yet local.

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<sup>10</sup> I use Stephens/Stevenson as both names have currency in the available literature. See Chapter 3 for an extensive discussion on possible origins of the name.

<sup>11</sup> Barnouw and Krishnaswamy does not give a date for Stephens – the implied date in comparison to Bombay is 1897-8, while Jha sets the date at April 4, 1898. Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, 5-6; Jha, “Profiles of Pioneers,” in *Cinema Vision*, vol 1, no. 1 (1980), 54-5.

<sup>12</sup> Prabhat Mukherjee “Hiralal Sen: Pioneer of *Indian Cinema* from Calcutta.” in *Seventy Years*, ed., Ramachandran, 49–59.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 51.

<sup>14</sup> Firoze Rangoonwalla, *Indian Films Index, 1912-1967* (Bombay: 1968).

“It mocked the educated Indian who aped the West and also bigoted stick-in-the-muds who abhorred everything that smacked of an alien culture.... Refreshingly different from the usual run of mythologicals, the film gained instant popularity in Bengal and Bombay.”<sup>15</sup>

According to this official history the major development in film form came with the talkies and New Theatres, a studio established in the early 1930s. These histories suggest that New Theatres films like *Chandidas* (1932/1934) and *Devdas* (1935) turned the tide of Bengali cinema, and of ‘Indian cinema’. Since then Bengali cinema has been considered to be synonymous with “good cinema” and the received narrative accords the cinema of Calcutta the status of arthouse cinema – as opposed to the more commercial Bombay cinema. The quote that starts this chapter is a typical case in point, encapsulating the dominant discourse that prevailed around the films – both at the time and later in the received film history. Interestingly, by the 1930s, Bombay was ahead in terms of the volume of films produced, however it is the Calcutta films that are privileged as quality cinema, where three of the four filmmakers mentioned in the quote above were in fact working for New Theatres in Calcutta. This perception of Calcutta cinema in the 1930s is in sharp contrast to the discussion on films from the earlier decade where Calcutta cinema finds scant mention.

And thus, while being accorded the status of regional cinema, Calcutta cinema has its distinct place within this grand narrative of ‘Indian cinema’, as an industry that has consistently produced films of high quality. Perhaps this perception was also helped along by a few utterances that have come down to us along the years. An oft-quoted remark that is found in the literature is that of Wilford Deming, a technician from Hollywood, who arrived to help with the migration to sound, first in Bombay, and then in Calcutta. In an article that originally appeared in the *American Cinematographer*, and was reprinted in the Indian film journal, *The Cinema*, in June 1932, Deming wrote:

“Calcutta provided a complete surprise... contrasting the rushing haphazard methods of Bombay. Here I was presented with the nucleus of what has become a real production unit. Formed by several Calcutta’s leading citizens, who had wisely surrounded themselves with competent assistants

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<sup>15</sup> Rani Burra, ed., *Looking Back*. (Delhi: Directorate of Film Festivals, 1991), 20.

well financed and with an ambitious programme of producing pictures for India actually comparable to those of the independent Hollywood companies, this company is building on a firm foundation.”<sup>16</sup>

The company in question is New Theatres. Another iconic actor-director of Indian cinema, P. C. Barua, is also quoted as saying that he did not want to move to Bombay and would prefer to work out of Calcutta because “It [Bombay] is not my field... it is a bazaar.”<sup>17</sup>

Such assertions clearly served to differentiate Calcutta films from Bombay, reinforcing the status of Calcutta cinema, and its star directors, as a cut above the more commercial Bombay. No doubt, the later international success of Satyajit Ray added to this perception of Bengali cinema, as did the common perception that Bengal was the centre of culture, while Bombay the centre of commerce.<sup>18</sup> This neat differentiation of Bombay-Calcutta is reminiscent of another such binary in the world of cinema: that of Hollywood and European cinema. Indeed, Deming sows the seeds of this contrast by comparing Calcutta, and New Theatres, to the Hollywood independents.

However, this fleeting reference to Hiralal Sen, D. G., Madan, and the New Theatres auteurs from Calcutta within the received narrative of pre-Partition Indian cinema gestures towards a history that is as long-standing as that of Bombay cinema, and one that is clearly significant enough to receive regular

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<sup>16</sup> Wilford Deming Jr., “Talking Picture in India,” *The Cinema*, June 1932.

<sup>17</sup> Chidananda Dasgupta, *Talking About Films* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, c.1981), 52

<sup>18</sup> The prominent presence of Bengali directors, music directors, actors and cinematographers in Bombay from the 1930s, as well as the influence of Bengali culture and narratives helped to perpetuate this status of Bengal as a centre of culture. Calcutta films were regularly remade in Bombay and the Bengali film aesthetic, with its more realist narrative structures, significantly influenced Bombay cinema of later decades. This perception was also fuelled by the eulogisation of *bhadralok* culture, Tagore’s status as a Nobel Laureate and movements like the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA). It should be mentioned here that Himansu Rai and Devika Rani, the founders of Bombay Talkies, another iconic Bombay studio of the 1930s and 1940s, were prominent Bengalis and internationally networked, and this cultural identity was actively mobilised by Bombay Talkies. Several other Bengali directors who infused a strong element of Bengali culture in Bombay cinema through the decades included Bimal Roy (50s and 60s) and Hrishikesh Mukherjee (in the 70s) amongst others, while filmmakers like Guru Dutt and a number of writers/lyricists were deeply influenced by IPTA. Several Bombay filmmakers had started out in Calcutta, as had stars, music directors, singers, cinematographers etc. including K. L. Saigal and Prithviraj Kapoor.

mention in the approved grand narrative that focuses on Bombay.<sup>19</sup> Of course, we get more detail if we look at the popular history written in Bengali. But historically there has been little scholarly engagement with the cinema of Calcutta. Contemporary scholars have started to question this grand narrative, adding more detail to the narratives of the industries in Bombay and Madras.<sup>20</sup> Most notably, the *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema* has added detail to an otherwise sketchy history.

This chapter seeks to put together this disparate material available in English and Bengali to attempt a more detailed and consistent understanding of the emergence of Calcutta cinema, a key film industry within India. In the process of sifting through the old and the new literature, and tracing back through to the primary sources, it also uncovers new material and insight into early cinema and the establishment of the studios in Calcutta. The effort here is not to fill in all the gaps, or produce a comprehensive history; indeed that is an impossible task for a single researcher to undertake, especially given the omissions and revisions of film history, and the transience of filmic material. Instead, by adding detail to a rather sketchy narrative, this chapter hopes to trace the emergence of the Calcutta industry, producing a more nuanced account of this industry, and interrogating its status as the producer of “good cinema”.

### **2.2.1 THE EARLY YEARS**

As discussed in the previous chapter, the arrival of film was as a matter of course. The routes charted by colonial networks allowed for the circulation of the latest European technologies into Calcutta with little time lag. Thus, it should not come as a surprise that film arrived in Calcutta quite so quickly after it was introduced to Europe in 1894.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> This oversight is not peculiar to the Calcutta industry; indeed as Steve Hughes has pointed out a similar inference can be made of the industry in Madras. See Hughes, “Is There Anyone Out There?”

<sup>20</sup> Bhaumik, “Emergence”; Hughes, “Is There Anyone Out There?”; Hughes, “When Film Came to Madras.” *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 1, no. 2 (2010): 147-168.

<sup>21</sup> Edison’s Kinetoscope palour was introduced to Europe in the summer of 1894 with a showing in Paris. The first Kinetoscope palour opened in London on 17 October 1894. This inspired the Lumière brothers who publicly unveiled the Cinematograph in Paris in December 1895. The first Cinematograph screening in London was in February 1896.

There are many more instances of film exhibition than the standard histories tell us. The earliest reference to the cinema in Calcutta that I have found is taken from a Bengali biography of Hiralal Sen. It refers to an advertisement in the English daily, *The Statesman*, on January 15, 1897, announcing the imminent arrival of the Cinematograph:

“Mr Hudson... is now bringing out from Europe the latest scientific illusion, called the cinematograph.... This novelty will be exhibited at the Theatre Royal on Wednesday next, the 20<sup>th</sup> instant....”<sup>22 23</sup>

The next reference to a moving image screening that comes up in the research is on January 26 that same year. This was an Animatograph screening by a Mr. Arthur Sullivan at the Ninth Annual Exhibition of the *Photographic Society of India*. From the report it appears that a few screenings were held at the venue:

"...several availed themselves of the opportunity of seeing in this novelty the means of throwing animated pictures upon the screen. The general public will have the opportunity of seeing it on this and subsequent evenings."<sup>24</sup>

As in London, the Animatograph had followed soon on the heels of the Cinematograph into Calcutta. The Animatograph was another name for Robert Paul's Theatrograph,<sup>25</sup> which was first shown publicly in London in February 1896, around the same time the Cinematograph had been unveiled in London in the Royal Polytechnic on Regent Street.<sup>26</sup>

In Calcutta too, after this first exposition, the natural destination for Sullivan and his Animatograph was the Bengali Public Theatre. Sullivan's next appearance, after the Photographic Society exhibition was at the Minerva Theatre on January

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<sup>22</sup> *The Statesman*, January 15, 1897, quoted in Chatterjee, *Aar Rekho Na Aadhare*, 22-23.

<sup>23</sup> Stephen Bottomore predates this date to an Edison Kinetoscope screening in Calcutta in winter 1895-96, referred to in an editorial in the *Journal of the Photographic Society of India*, July 1896. Bottomore suggests that this is the first known screening in Asia, let alone India. Stephen Bottomore, "A New Claim," *The Bioscope Blog*, <http://bioscopic.wordpress.com/2007/08/15>

<sup>24</sup> *The Photographic Society's Exhibition Report, Statesman and Friend of India*, January 27, 1897.

<sup>25</sup> Interestingly Paul christened his new device Theatrograph, perhaps because his films were shown in the theatres of London.

<sup>26</sup> Luke McKernan, "R. W. Paul." <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/people/id/449512/>  
The venue is the current Regent Campus of the University Of Westminster.

31.<sup>27</sup> There are also references to Cinematograph shows held in Classic Theatre in March and April 1898 by a Reiley.<sup>28</sup>

The official history of film recycles the Mr. Stephens/ Prof. Stevenson screenings as the originary myth. However as the paragraphs above demonstrate, there were several screenings before Stevenson's appearance with the Bioscope in Calcutta - and this research only scratches the surface of the media frenzy in these early months of film in Calcutta. Stevenson first materialises in October 1898, with Bioscope screenings at the Star Theatre<sup>29</sup> and for long this date and venue was considered to be the point of introduction of film in Calcutta. It is quite possible that history remembers the Star screening because it was the top stage for Bengali Public Theatre in the city and elite Bengalis regularly visited Star Theatre for their evening entertainment. Thus, the Star screening by Stevenson would have been noticed by the Bengali elite and circulated in the Bengali press much more widely than the other screenings across the city. History, as we know, is written by the elite and it is most likely that this story circulated in popular memory over generations, thereby becoming an urban legend. This would also explain why the term 'bioscope' was used to refer to film in Calcutta although the bioscope was introduced fairly late in the history of motion picture exhibition in the city.

A scan of newspapers suggests that these film shows were held in theatres in both the native (Minerva, Classic, Star) and the European towns (Theatre Royal, Opera House) as part of a variety entertainment programme along with the main theatrical production. It may be stressed that itinerant exhibitors wasted no time in acquiring the latest technological novelties and travelling around the world with their new machines and film packages, showing films to new audiences, and shooting new moving pictures wherever they went. These were entrepreneurs who maximised their profits by finding new users for their new machines, and novel ways of making money from the same package of films by taking them to new audiences. The first filmmakers were itinerant producer-exhibitors, because many of the first film apparatuses were designed to shoot, print and project film.

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<sup>27</sup> Sankar Bhattacharya, *Bangla Rangalayer Itihaser Upadan*, (Calcutta: West Bengal State Book Board, 1982), 467.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 500-502.

<sup>29</sup> Chatterjee, *Aar Rekhona Aadhare*, 31.

As is apparent from the discussion above several screen technologies arrived in Calcutta around the same time. In these years, newspaper advertisements refer to at least four different technological apparatuses showing moving pictures in Calcutta – the Cinematograph, the Animatograph, the Bioscope and the Kinetoscope (in winter 1895-6) – all brought in by different itinerant exhibitors. Significantly, these technologies arrived in the city independent of Bombay, suggesting that Calcutta was on a separate entertainment circuit than Bombay, and the same troupes did not necessarily find their way to both cities.

The likes of Sestier, and Carl Hertz, came to Bombay because they were en route to Australia,<sup>30</sup> while Hudson was an established entertainer based in the Theatre Royal in Calcutta and imported the Cinematograph to show off this “latest scientific illusion” to his customers. We do not know very much about Sullivan, Reiley, Harding and the others who also made Calcutta their destination, and more research is needed to fill in their details. Maurice Bandmann too made Calcutta his destination in the early 1900s, with the Bandmann Opera Company first visiting in 1901,<sup>31</sup> and more regularly from 1905.<sup>32</sup> But his obituary in *The Statesman* alludes to a longer connection: Bandmann’s father had played in Calcutta as part of a travelling theatre group, in the late nineteenth century.<sup>33</sup>

Primarily it was only those troupes who made India their major destination that went to more than one of the three major metropolises (Bombay, Calcutta and Madras) since this required spending months staying and travelling across the subcontinent, despite the ease of travel offered by the fast expanding rail network from the 1860s onwards.<sup>34</sup> It was fairly straightforward for these visiting foreign

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<sup>30</sup> See Hughes, “When Film Came to Madras”; Carl Hertz, *A Modern Mystery Merchant: the trials, tricks, and travels of Carl Hertz* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1924).

<sup>31</sup> *The Times of India*, Bombay, March 1901

<sup>32</sup> Maurice E. Bandmann (1873-1922) a.k.a. Maurice Bandman, owned travelling variety show and theatre companies that travelled across the world including India and the Far East. In *Thacker’s Indian Directory, 1921*, he was listed as the managing director of Bandman Varieties Ltd. He also owned theatres, in partnership, in several international cities, including Calcutta, Bombay, Shanghai and Gibraltar. Later Bandmann dropped the last ‘n’ from his name. For reasons of consistency I will use the initial spelling, i.e. Bandmann, throughout this thesis.

<sup>33</sup> *The Statesman*, 13 March, 1922

<sup>34</sup> Direct rail link between Calcutta and Delhi was established in 1866, while Bombay and Calcutta were linked in 1870, as was Calcutta-Lahore in 1870.

showmen to sail into one of these three main port cities of the subcontinent and find local audiences in one or more city venues. The cosmopolitan nature of metropolitan audiences in colonial port cities, discussed in chapter 1, ensured that these foreign showmen were able to exhibit for days at a stretch if they tapped into the right networks. Several of these exhibitors visiting Bombay or Madras were en route to Australia, while those visiting Calcutta were headed to S. E. Asia. Thus, India was a stopover, not a destination for these showmen.

Those who did stay on for longer periods in India showed in more than one venue in the city they had landed in, and once the programme and audiences were exhausted they toured neighbouring towns and cities, often in association with a local Indian partner. But these instances were rare, especially in the first decade of the cinema. Most often local entrepreneurs like Hudson (and later Sen and Madan) imported the equipment and film packages, showing at city venues and often doubling up as travelling cinema operators. While Hudson managed a prominent entertainment theatre in Calcutta, and regularly invited entertainment groups to perform in his theatre, others like Hiralal Sen or those connected to agencies were already established in the photographic trade and thus were familiar with imaging technologies. Importantly these agencies also held an import licence and regularly imported equipment into India. These were entrepreneurs who were responsible for popularising film to mass audiences in the cities, the *mofussil* and through rural South Asia. This is a similar story across India: Ardeshir Irani, a key film person in Bombay started out in the family business in musical instruments and phonographs in Bombay,<sup>35</sup> and R. Venkiah Nayudu owned a flourishing photography business in Madras.<sup>36</sup>

Further, as discussed in Chapter 1, agency houses in India had been engaged in importing the latest technologies throughout the nineteenth century, including cameras, and they started to import film equipment and films by the early 1900s. Newspapers regularly advertised the sale of screen technologies in the early 1900s, including “Chronograph...Bioscopes, Cinematographes, Animatographs”

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<sup>35</sup> Hameeduddin Mahmood, *Ardeshir M. Irani: Father of the Indian Talkie*, in *Seventy Years*, ed., Ramachandran, 62.

<sup>36</sup> Hughes, “Is There Anybody Out There?”, 42.

along with film stock and medical equipment by the Anglo-American Bioscope Company;<sup>37</sup> and “Bioscopes, Films and Accessories” by the Great Eastern Hotel Company, “the sole agents in India” of Pathé Frères.<sup>38</sup>

Within the first decade several local travelling cinemas cropped up. These showed in the city and in the *mofussil*, touring right across the eastern region, all the way up to the tea gardens of Assam and Bengal. Very little is known about these travelling cinemas but some names come through in the literature. The most notable of these include Hiralal Sen’s Royal Bioscope, Kumar Gupta’s London Bioscope, Chatterjee Brothers’ Imperial Bioscope, A. Ganguly’s Electric Theatre, Calcutta Bioscope (owned by a Muslim gentleman from Calcutta), Wellington Bioscope, Globe Trotter Bioscope, Monarch Bioscope, Capital Bioscope and Anadi Bose’s Aurora Cinema Company (formed later in c.1909/11).<sup>39</sup> The owners of these travelling cinemas were local citizens from all over Calcutta, and this list, which is by no means exhaustive, indicates how widespread bioscope fever had become within the first decade of its arrival in Calcutta. But the most famous of the local travelling cinemas was undoubtedly Hiralal Sen’s Royal Bioscope, discussed below.

Thus we can observe the emergence of three types of cinema circuits – the first included the likes of Hudson who managed an entertainment venue within the city and imported equipment and films; or foreign exhibitors like Sullivan and Reiley who came to Calcutta and showed at a few city venues and expositions; or local travelling exhibitors like Hiralal Sen, Kumar Gupta etc. Then there was a regional circuit where mostly local exhibitors (like Sen and Gupta) travelled in the *mofussil* and countryside of Bengal. A third type were the big-time travelling exhibitors like Maurice Bandmann who operated a transnational circuit, following colonial routes, and had the resources to travel between the three metropolitan centres of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. The first and third circuits were

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<sup>37</sup> Advertisement in *The Statesman*, January 1904, reprinted in Ray Choudhury, ed., *Early Calcutta Advertisements*, 321.

<sup>38</sup> Advertisement in *The Statesman*, April, 1905, *Ibid.*, 331. Also see *The Times of India*, June 1905. The adverts in the Bombay TOI confirm that at this time Pathé films were solely imported and distributed out of Calcutta.

<sup>39</sup> Mukherjee, *Bangla Chalachchitrer Itihas*, 31.

confined to cities while the second was a non- metropolitan circuit that originated in the cities.

### 2.2.2 OF MYTHS AND ORIGINS

Hiralal Sen (1866 - 1917) is a romantic figure in the history of 'Indian cinema', particularly in Calcutta where he is accorded iconic status as the founding father of Indian cinema.<sup>40</sup> Tales abound of his achievements, struggles and ultimate death in penury and suffering. There is also a deep sense of injustice amongst the self-proclaimed popular film historians in the city today at Sen's lack of recognition as the pioneer of cinema at the hands of national custodians of film history.

Sen's achievements remain the stuff of legend: the filmography is contested but none of his films remain for us to see. There are various accounts of how Sen picked up the art of filmmaking, but the most stable narrative is that he learnt to operate the equipment and picked up techniques of filmmaking while assisting Mr. Stephens/ Prof. Stevenson. Other accounts state that Sen learnt filmmaking from Father Lafarge while studying at St Xavier's College, Calcutta.<sup>41</sup> Lafarge who taught at the renowned educational institution is said to have experimented with various imaging technologies in his laboratories, including the magic lantern, using these as educational tools through the late nineteenth century.

Hiralal Sen then started out independently, and again there are conflicting accounts of how he acquired his equipment. One version claims that he imported a camera and projector from Warwick Trading Company in London; while another suggests that he bought the equipment off Stephens/Stevenson when the latter sold it off and returned to London.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Personal conversations with people in the industry, August 2006. Also see as an example Jha, "Profiles of Pioneers," in *Cinema Vision* vol. 1, no. 1 (1980), 54.

<sup>41</sup> Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*; Mukherjee, *Bangla Chalachchitrer Itihas*; EIC; Mukherjee "Hiralal Sen," in *Seventy Years*, ed., Ramachandran, 49–59; Asghar, *Hiralal Sen*; Chatterjee, *Aar Rekhona Aadhare*.

<sup>42</sup> Chatterjee, *Aar Rekhona Aadhare*. Sajal Chatterjee, through his painstaking scanning of newspaper adverts, finds references to two Stevensons in these years– the first is a J. J. Stevenson showing the Bioscope at the Star from October 1898 to May 1899. The second reference is to a T. J. Stevenson who was showing at the Star Theatre and at the Dalhousie Institute in Dec 1899 and

Sen formed the **Royal Bioscope Company** with his brother, Motilal Sen, and set out as an itinerant exhibitor across Bengal, and also showed his films in Calcutta, primarily in the Classic Theatre, in collaboration with its manager A. N. Dutt. Along the way Sen became a prolific filmmaker, filming scenes from Classic Theatre and the streets of Calcutta and screening these new shorts together with the old package of foreign films.

Late nineteenth century media practitioners like Hiralal Sen were already familiar with the mechanics and aesthetics of the camera by the time film arrived in Calcutta, as is the case with other pioneers worldwide. He and his brother owned a photographic studio in Calcutta in the 1890s, and by 1898 “he was already an accomplished photographer with a string of awards in all-India competitions.”<sup>43</sup> Biographies of Sen suggest that he liked to experiment with technology and so it was no surprise that he started experimenting with this latest visual medium.<sup>44</sup>

His first attempts at filming were with scenes from Classic theatre: *A Dancing Scene from the Opera*, *The Flower of Persia* is his first known film. This film was apparently shot under Stevenson’s supervision and shown at the Star.<sup>45</sup> Sen then started to shoot scenes from the Classic plays regularly and exhibited them alongside the stage plays. By the turn of the century theatre programmes regularly listed film shows, along with other variety entertainment, in an effort to attract

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Jan 1900, again with the Bioscope. T. J. Stevenson materialises in the adverts for a second time in July 1900. Sajal Chatterjee’s explanation for this discrepancy in names is that T. J. could be a relative of J. J. Stevenson who returned to India with J. J.’s equipment. J. J. advertised to sell off his equipment after his shows at the Star Theatre ended on 7 May, 1899. Chatterjee suggests that Stevenson may not have been able to sell it off and offers the possibility that T. J. Stevenson returned to Calcutta with the same equipment in the winter of that year to continue screenings at the Star and other venues. Chatterjee says that this was most certainly the time when Hiralal Sen got involved with film, while the EIC asserts that Sen had started filming in 1898.

Also see Hughes, “When Film Came to Madras,” 147-168. Hughes suggests that Stevenson came to Calcutta from Madras. T. Stevenson was a Madras-based proprietor of a photographic store and the first Cinematograph exhibitor in Madras, in December 1896. After this point Stevenson showed across South India as a travelling exhibitor and travelled to Calcutta in 1898, adopting the title Professor.

See Chapter 3 for a further discussion on the identity of Stephens/Stevenson.

<sup>43</sup> Mukherjee “Hiralal Sen,” in *Seventy Years*, ed., Ramachandran, 51

<sup>44</sup> Mukherjee, *Bangla Chalachchitrer Itihas*; Asghar, *Hiralal Sen*; Chatterjee, *Aar Rekhona Aadhare*.

<sup>45</sup> Asghar, *Hiralal Sen*; Chatterjee, *Aar Rekhona Aadhare*; EIC; Mukherjee, “Hiralal Sen,” in *Seventy Years*, ed., Ramachandran.

dwindling audiences to the theatre. Scenes from plays were shot and then played back to audiences in the theatre, along with foreign actualities.<sup>46</sup> In these early years film was used as a novel ‘attraction’ to draw in audiences to theatrical venues in both the native and European towns, as can be seen in the announcement for the Hudson screening quoted above.<sup>47</sup> This practice seems to have been part of a general trend towards sensationalism on the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Calcutta stage, and film became an attraction along with a host of other popular stage tricks like trapdoors, toy trains etc., as discussed in Chapter 1.

The importance of these theatrical screenings needs to be stressed as they played a significant role in familiarising audiences with the moving image and helped popularise the bioscope amongst Bengali audiences. On the other hand, these short films were taken around by travelling cinemas and thus also helped to popularise scenes from the theatre amongst mass audiences in the *mofussil*. In later years, once the talkie arrived, the industry would adapt several theatrical productions for the cinema. Local audiences would flock the cinemas in the *mofussil* because they were familiar with the narratives of these films from viewing scenes from the theatre in their local travelling bioscopes. Another draw for the talkies were the songs, which were often taken from the theatrical versions and were also in circulation through gramophone recordings. A large proportion of the earliest gramophone recordings in India were made of performers of the Classic Theatre and the two Madan-owned theatres in Calcutta in 1902.<sup>48</sup> These intersections between several performative and media forms were forged from the very beginnings of the cinema in Calcutta.

By 1900, Sen had started to shoot actualities. These were mainly shots of Calcutta – street scenes, processions, etc. By 1903, Sen was making newsreels: some of his newsreels included the *Coronation Ceremony and Durbar* of 1903 (marking the

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<sup>46</sup> Sankar Bhattacharya, *Bangla Rangalayer Itihaser Upadan*; Chatterjee, *Aar Rekhona Aadhare*, 27-31.

<sup>47</sup> For a discussion of ‘attractions’ and early film in Calcutta see Chatterjee, “Peripheral Encounters,” 171-182.

<sup>48</sup> For a discussion of the first gramophone recordings in India see Michael S. Kinnear, *The Gramophone Company's First Indian Recordings, 1899-1908* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1994).

coronation of Edward VII), *The Bengal Partition Film* (1905), *The Grand Delhi Coronation Durbar and Royal Visit to Calcutta* (1912) etc.<sup>49</sup> The *Grand Durbars* of 1903 and 1911 were amongst the first spectacular media events in the world and were shot by several Indian and foreign crews including Sen and the Madans (shot by Jyotish Sarkar) from Calcutta; H. S. Bhatavedekar from Bombay, Pathé, Charles Urban etc.<sup>50</sup>

According to some accounts Sen also started making advertising films around 1903.<sup>51</sup> He is credited by several sources as having made one feature length film, *Alibaba and the Forty Thieves* (1903), while others dispute the length of this film and its generic status.<sup>52</sup> Sen would certainly have filmed this on the Classic stage but as the film has not survived it cannot be ascertained whether this was indeed a film in its own right, or a filmed version of the super hit Bengali play that ran to packed houses at Classic.

Hiralal Sen appears to have been a prolific filmmaker producing several films until 1913, when he faced bankruptcy. His mythic achievements, however, cannot be open to scrutiny as none of his films survived. They were all destroyed in a fire in 1917, a few days before his death, and it is a difficult task to construct a comprehensive narrative of the first few years of film production from the fragments of material and the volumes of popular memory that live on. However, what is interesting from glancing through the remnants of the evidence is that, clearly, Sen was making several genres right from the very beginning.

While Sen takes precedence in the available histories he was by no means the only pioneer making films in the 1900s. The **Elphinstone Bioscope Company**, owned by J. F. Madan, started producing newsreels made by Jyotish Sarkar. Sarkar had

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<sup>49</sup> EIC; Asghar, *Hiralal Sen*.

<sup>50</sup> For a discussion of the Durbar films see Stephen Bottomore, "An Amazing Quarter Mile of Moving Gold, Gems and Genealogy': Filming India's 1902/03 Delhi Durbar," *Historical Journal Of Film Radio And Television* 15, no. 4 (1995): 495-515.

<sup>51</sup> Asghar, *Hiralal Sen*, 63-64.

<sup>52</sup> EIC; Asghar, *Hiralal Sen*; Chatterjee, *Aar Rekhona Aadhare*; Mukherjee, "Hiralal Sen," in *Seventy Years*, ed., Ramachandran; Jha, "Profiles of Pioneers," in *Cinema Vision* vol. 1, no. 1 (1980), 54-5. Popular accounts of Sen in Bengali use this instance to argue for Sen to be acknowledged as the first director of a full-length film (and not Phalke). Prabhat Mukherjee claims that the film was not merely a record and included several technological innovations including wide-screen and electric light projections, but does not offer any references.

worked with Pathé before he joined the Madans in the early 1900s and had reportedly toured S. E. Asia with Pathé.<sup>53</sup> Elphinstone's first indigenous newsreel was possibly the *Great Bengal Partition Movement* (1905).<sup>54</sup> Other films around this time credited to Elphinstone Bioscope include the *Opening and Closing of the Howrah Bridge*,<sup>55</sup> *Bathing Ghat of Howrah*, *Goat Sacrifice at Kalighat* (a famous Calcutta temple), *Grand Pareshnath Procession*, *Grand Masonic Procession* and *Dancing of Indian Nautch Girls*.<sup>56</sup> In later years Sarkar also made several films on King George V's visit to India in 1911-12, as the official filmmaker of the entourage, including *Delhi Darbar and Coronation*, a film that was banned by the colonial government.<sup>57</sup>

Some other actualities that are ascribed to Madan's Elphinstone Bioscope include *Tilak's Visit to Calcutta and Procession* (1906), *Amir of Kabul's Procession* (1907), *The Terrible Hyderabad Flood* (1908), *New View of Bombay* (1909) and *Cotton Fire in Bombay* (1912).<sup>58</sup> From the list of titles the contents of these films largely seem to be either actualities (floods, fires, political processions and events) or the documentation of exotic events, places and practices (dances, rituals, exotic scenes along the river bank) – the latter possibly aimed at a foreign audience.

Not very much more is known about productions in this period, given the tendency of film history to only pick up on pioneering achievements. While we do come across sporadic names of other travelling cinemas in the tens and teens it is not known if they produced any films.

### **2.3.1 RISE OF SILENT FEATURES: An Industry in the Making**

The First World War was a turning point in film finance. J. F. Madan made huge profits in the war as the official supplier to the British Army. This, along with any profits he may have made through his film exhibition businesses across colonial

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<sup>53</sup> Chatterjee, *Aar Rekhona Aadhare*, 27; Choudhury, *Nijere Haraye Khunji*, vol.1, 243-244.

<sup>54</sup> EIC

<sup>55</sup> Modi, "Jamshedji Madan," in Mody ed., *The Parsis in Western India*, 205.

<sup>56</sup> Rangoonwalla, *Seventy Five Years*, 19.

<sup>57</sup> EIC

<sup>58</sup> Modi, "Jamshedji Madan," in Mody ed., *The Parsis in Western India*, 205.

India,<sup>59</sup> led him to expand his topical film unit and enter into feature length productions. One can also speculate that the British administration was keen to employ British or American film producers, like Bandmann (who came on as official filmmaker for the British Government in the mid-teens), in the use of media for propaganda during the war. As a result, Madan may have faced a drop in earnings from short film production and thus decided to diversify into commercial production.

Possibly, this move into feature film production was also prompted by what film history acknowledges to be the runaway success of locally made films like Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra* (1913/1917) made in Bombay. As the owner of several cinema theatres in Bombay Madan would have been well aware of the success of Phalke's films.<sup>60</sup> In the light of this history it is ironic that the *Times of India*, in 1917, was unaware of Phalke's films, but does make note of Madan's film. The Madans' first feature film was based on the well-known legend of king Harishchandra (the connections with Phalke's case are unmistakable). *Satyawadi Raja Harishchandra* released in Calcutta in 1917. Their next film, *Bilwamangal*, released in 1919, is now credited as the first Bengali film by contemporary historians.<sup>61</sup> The film was written by Champsi Udeshi and based on the classic 1886 Bengali play by the legendary actor-director of Bengali Public Theatre, Girish Ghosh. Thereon the Madans embarked on mass scale production of feature films and virtually dominated silent and early talkie production until the early 1930s, when the company stopped production. It is worth noting here that the Madans were the only vertically integrated company in South Asia at this time, producing, distributing and exhibiting its own films.

Around this time a second feature film production house came into existence. The **Aurora Cinema Company** had been set up as a travelling cinema company in

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<sup>59</sup> Madan owned a large number of permanent cinemas across India by this time. The Bombay TOI regularly carried advertisements of films screened in Madan-owned cinemas through the teens. Bhaumik also suggests that by 1917 Madan had gone into partnership with Bandmann and collectively owned several cinemas in Bombay. Bhaumik, "Emergence," 53.

<sup>60</sup> Madan owned the Empire and Excelsior cinemas in Bombay by this time. See advertisements in TOI. Also see Bhaumik, "Emergence," 53.

<sup>61</sup> Traditional histories considered *Bilet Pherat/ England Returned* (1921) as the first Bengali film.

1911,<sup>62</sup> or 1909 according to Aurora's current owner (see Chapter 4 for more on this). The company was formed as a joint partnership firm with Debi Ghosh and its travelling cinema business was confined to eastern India. By 1917 the company started to get involved in production. According to Suresh Chhabria, Aurora won a contract to make short films for the army in 1917,<sup>63</sup> and if this is correct then this may have allowed Aurora the financial strength to venture into feature film production. Aurora remained a small production company in the early 1920s and although it is the least discussed company in the available literature, from this early period, it went on to play a crucial role in the Calcutta film industry subsequently - a role that will be discussed through the rest of this thesis. Even in these early days of the industry Aurora played an integral part in the establishment of the independent cinema, Russa Theatre, to exhibit films that were not distributed by Madan Theatres.<sup>64</sup>

Aurora's co-owner, Anadi Bose, had a longer history of involvement in the arts and entertainment business in Calcutta: he had made investments in the Bengali Public Theatre (in Manmohan Theatre) in the 1900s. Following on from the trend set by Hiralal Sen and A. N. Dutt, Bose held regular film screenings in Manmohan Theatre, one of the key stages in Bengali Public Theatre, as part of the variety entertainment format. Bose's brother owned a photography shop in Calcutta, and it was there that Bose met Debi Ghosh, a photography student at the Calcutta School of Art,<sup>65</sup> who also helped with the management of the shop. Debi Ghosh learnt to operate the projector from a travelling cinema company and became a key figure in Aurora's travelling cinema.<sup>66</sup>

In 1916/17, the Aurora Cinema Company acquired two film cameras used by Hiralal Sen.<sup>67</sup> Debi Ghosh started to experiment with the cameras and by 1919 he was filming scenes from the theatre. Around this time Ghosh started photographing what was eventually to become Aurora's first feature film,

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<sup>62</sup> Mukherjee, *Bangla Chalachchitrer Itihas*, 53.

<sup>63</sup> Suresh Chhabria, *The Encyclopedia of Early Cinema*, ed. Richard Abel (Oxon: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Anjan Bose.

<sup>65</sup> A prominent art school at the forefront of modernist art movements in colonial India.

<sup>66</sup> Mukherjee, *Bangla Chalachchitrer Itihas*, 51.

<sup>67</sup> Mukherjee, *Bangla Chalachchitrer Itihas*, 53. These were a Williamson and a Prefect camera. Several Bengali sources suggest that Sen did this on the brink of bankruptcy.

*Ratnakar* (released August 13, 1921). The film was shot in outdoor locations, in the wealthy suburban bungalows of Calcutta.<sup>68</sup> Filmmaking in Calcutta was too new to merit the establishment of dedicated motion picture studios yet.

The biographies of Anadi Bose and Debi Ghosh, similar to those of Hiralal Sen and the stories of scores of others involved in the cinema, spell out the close links that this emerging medium had with earlier entertainment, art forms and technology, especially photography and theatre. Early film pioneers like Hiralal Sen and Debi Ghosh had a background in photography, while Bose's family were involved in the trade.

Aurora's stories also shed light on the crucial role that informal networks played in the expansion of the cinema. In effect, informal networks continued to be an essential part of the film industry as the medium through which films, finance and personnel circulated. A further connection that needs to be underlined is the interrelatedness of theatre and film from the earliest years of the cinema in Calcutta. As previously discussed the owner of Classic Theatre, Dutt, championed film exhibition in his theatre, and Anadi Bose started out through ownership of Manmohan Theatre. J. F. Madan too owned two well-known Parsi theatre companies (the Elphinstone and the Khatau-Alfred) along with two established stages in Calcutta (the Alfred and the Corinthian theatres). Madan's involvement in cinema started with showing films in his theatres, and his theatre and film companies had a symbiotic relationship. A large number of actors, directors, writers, set-designers etc. in the Calcutta industry also had close links with the Bengali Public Theatre and several hit plays of the Bengali stage were adapted for the cinema through the silent and early talkie era.

The Aurora Cinema Company made five feature films in the 1920s, including a 2-reel comedy. They also started making newsreels, *Aurora Tuki-taki* (Aurora Titbits), along similar lines to the Pathé newsreels.<sup>69</sup> The thrust of their filmmaking initiatives from the 1920s onwards was the production of short films,

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<sup>68</sup> Mukherjee, *Bangla Chalachchitrer Itihas*, 54.

<sup>69</sup> Mukherjee, *Bangla Chalachchitrer Itihas*, 54; the EIC says these were a compilation of clips, without elaborating on the kind of clips.

produced primarily for the government. Aurora had produced several short films by 1927 for the Education, Health and Agricultural departments of the government,<sup>70</sup> and continued this throughout the period under study. It is perhaps this perceived marginal involvement in feature film production that has led it to be under-represented in the histories of cinema.

The two Calcutta production houses of the early phase that have secured much print space in the available histories of Calcutta cinema are the Indo-British Film Company and the Taj Mahal Film Company. The **Indo-British Film Company** (c.1919/1920) has been discussed in contemporary journals as the first all-Bengali production house, financed by P. N. Dutt, a wealthy and eminent Bengali businessman. The core team included N. C. Laharry,<sup>71</sup> D. G. and Jyotish Sarkar. The Indo-British Film Company has been celebrated in the available literature, especially D. G., although they made only three films: *Bilet Pherat/ England Returned* (released 26/2/1921), *Sadhu ki Shaitan* (released 4/3/1922) and *Jashodanandan* (released 5/6/1922). Their first film, in particular, has been celebrated in official histories of 'Indian cinema', as discussed above.

While the film had a clear nationalist storyline, delving into the backgrounds of the key personalities in the company may give us another clue as to why this particular company finds special mention in the annals of Indian film history. D. G., the director and lead actor in *Bilet Pherat*, was the son of an eminent personality in Calcutta. He was also an art school student from Shantiniketan, the renowned university started by Tagore<sup>72</sup> and one of his brothers was married to Tagore's daughter.<sup>73</sup> D. G. excelled in make-up and masquerade and had already published a book of photographs of himself dressed up as a wide range of character types.<sup>74</sup> Another key person in the company was Jyotish Sarkar, who was by then the leading cinematographer in Calcutta. Sarkar started out with Pathé Frères shooting Pathé Newsreels in South and S. E. Asia, for which he

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<sup>70</sup> ICCE Vol. II, 666.

<sup>71</sup> Sometimes referred to as N. C. Lahiri. See the following chapter for more on Laharry.

<sup>72</sup> Rabindranath Tagore is the leading literateur of Bengal. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1916.

<sup>73</sup> Choudhury, *Nijere Haraye Khunji* vol. I, 243.

<sup>74</sup> Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, 244.

reportedly travelled to Singapore, Hong Kong, Penang etc.<sup>75</sup> He was the “film projector operator” for King George V’s visit to India in 1911 and consequently travelled with the emperor’s entourage. According to actor Ahindra Choudhury, when Pathé was sold off to the Madans, Sarkar moved with the company, and shot all the Madan films, until he left to form the Indo-British Film Company in the late teens.<sup>76</sup> The third member of the team, Laharry, had been the general manager of Madan Theatres’ exhibition business.<sup>77</sup> According to Choudhury Laharry was an anglicised Bengali and was employed by Indo-British for a monthly salary of Rs. 1500, a princely sum in those days. Clearly this was a company formed by the Calcutta elite, with the financial means to produce films, as well as involving some of the best expertise available locally in acting, filmmaking and in film exhibition.

The Indo-British Film Company was envisioned on a grand scale by D. G. and his team. They bought acres of land to construct a film city modelled on Hollywood on the outskirts of Calcutta.<sup>78</sup> They invested in equipment including a Bell and Howell printing machine.<sup>79</sup> Ahindra Choudhury mentions that the news of the formation of this company created a buzz amongst Bengali film enthusiasts in those days:

“It was not impossible for them to realise a grand project given their financial capital and resources. All in all, they created an enormous expectation in our minds.”<sup>80</sup> [My translation]

**The Taj Mahal Film Company**, founded by iconic theatre actor/director Shishir Bhaduri, is also widely celebrated in the literature, although they too made only four films, released between 1922 and 1924. Key reasons for their popularity with contemporary critics and commentators were the association with Bhaduri as well as the fact that three of their films were adaptations from famous Bengali novels –

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<sup>75</sup> Chatterjee, *Aar Rekhona Aadhare*, 27.

<sup>76</sup> Choudhury, *Nijere Haraye Khunji* vol. I, 244.

<sup>77</sup> Modi, “Jamshedji Madan,” in Mody ed., *The Parsis in Western India*, 213.

<sup>78</sup> Choudhury, *Nijere Haraye Khunji* vol. I, 244.

<sup>79</sup> Mukherjee, *Bangla Chalachchitrer Itihas*, 58.

<sup>80</sup> Choudhury, *Nijere Haraye Khunji* vol. I, 244.

two from Saratchandra Chatterjee's<sup>81</sup> novels and one of Tagore's. This practice of adaptations from the literary canon would surely have met with approval from the elite classes and has ensured that the company remains alive in the living memory of early Bengali cinema.

The resurgence of Bengali cultural identity amongst the *bhadralok* in Calcutta from the late nineteenth century onwards may have been another reason for the celebration of these two companies as harbingers of Bengali culture within the increasingly popular cultural vehicle of the cinema. At this time, Calcutta was a vibrant centre of culture within India and already boasted a growing literary, theatrical and artistic lineage. As discussed in Chapter 1, much of this cultural activity was nationalist in character, even while modelled on European modernism, and dealt with subjects of social reform, rebellion against oppressive regimes and the search for a modern Bengali identity. The young educated elite in Calcutta welcomed the cinema but wanted to create, like their literature and their theatre, a distinctive cinema that reflected elite Bengali cultural tastes. The only available locally made cinema at the time was the Madan films which did not satisfy the *bhadralok*. The Madan films were largely shot on the sets of the Corinthian Theatre, the Madan-owned Parsi stage, and Bengali journals are replete with complaints that the films did not reflect Bengali culture. These may be the desires and the expectations that Ahindra Choudhury and others were looking to from D. G., Bhaduri and others.

A third, linked, reason for the rejection of the Madans and their films as one of their own, by the Bengali elite, was that the Madans owned most of the permanent cinemas in Calcutta in the 1920s and, to lessen competition, Madan cinemas often did not screen films made by other companies. In the ICC enquiry there were numerous complaints by Bengal producers about the Madans' monopolistic practices.<sup>82</sup> The films made by these independent companies were released not in the Madan-owned theatres but in an independent theatre that came up in 1921, the

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<sup>81</sup> Saratchandra Chatterjee was the leading Bengali novelist of the time and his oeuvre primarily included the social realist novel set in Bengal. Many of his novels were adapted into film and some of these films, like *Devdas*, have become legendary.

<sup>82</sup> ICCE, p 669 et. al. Also see below and Chapter 3 for a detailed discussion on monopoly.

Russa Theatre,<sup>83</sup> and rarely found extended circulation in the cinemas of Calcutta. In the contemporary discourse, in Bengali journals and the ICCE, Bengali-owned film companies are continually valorised as victims of this monopoly. This romantic characterisation of the Bengali industry (both personnel and companies) is a recurrent thread especially in the writings originating from Calcutta - from Hiralal Sen not being adequately recognised, to the perceived injustice of Bengali producers by the Madans' policies etc., and this rhetoric finds much space in contemporary trade journals.

It should be stressed here that many of these personalities working in the early Calcutta film industry came from the educated and elite classes; several were sympathetic to the cause of freedom from the colonial government, even if they were not actively involved in the nationalist struggle for Independence. Instead their youthful fervour translated into a desire for self-expression of local culture through the new medium of the cinema. The cinema was the modern cultural medium of the youth – it was the young who were drawn to the industry. Many young men joined the film line – either starting their own companies or enlisting in the few that existed at the time, and for them film became a vehicle of cultural articulation. By all accounts, the cinema was very popular with young audiences as well. Several respondents in the ICCE mention that young students regularly thronged the cinemas, and a number of articles and autobiographies fondly recall days at the cinema.

Of course, the cinema also beckoned as an alternate career opportunity for many of these spirited and creative young men who were not interested in the standard white collar occupations their education and upbringing opened up for them, that is, jobs in the colonial administration and the judiciary.<sup>84</sup> Besides, as Barnouw and Krishnaswamy indicate in their profile of Debaki Bose, the non-cooperation movement in 1920 against the colonial government resulted in people registering their protest by resigning from jobs in the colonial administration and from companies under foreign management. Thousands of students left schools and

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<sup>83</sup> The Russa Theatre was set up collectively by the independent companies in Calcutta including Aurora. More on this in the following chapter.

<sup>84</sup> As an example see Dhiraj Bhattacharya's autobiography, *Jakhan Police Chhilam* (Calcutta: New Age Publishing, 1954).

colleges in protest.<sup>85</sup> Scanning through available articles and autobiographies of film personnel it becomes apparent that the new profession of the cinema emerged as an alternate possibility that had the potential to realise the reformist impulses of the modern Bengali youth. Ahindra Choudhury, Modhu Bose, Dhiraj Bhattacharya, even Nirranjan Pal, who had to be shipped off to England to avoid imprisonment and subsequently went on to work as a screenwriter in London, Calcutta and Bombay, are all good examples of this impulse.

However, all these ambitious efforts at production were short-lived. The Indo-British Company dissolved soon, as did the Taj Mahal Company. Although Calcutta producers in general insisted to the ICC that locally produced films found a strong following, D. G. acknowledges that his films did not have long runs in the theatres because of problems of distribution and the monopoly of the Madans.<sup>86</sup> The partners went their separate ways, forming new companies, or joining existing ones.

Despite the exaltation of these films in the received literature, on deeper interrogation of the contemporary journals, it appears that the films may not have been as universally admired as the received literature would have us believe.<sup>87</sup> In an article from August 1923, writer Sourindra Mohan Mukherjee says,

“...the film [*Bilet Pherat/ England Returned*] was sold out as soon as it was advertised due to the eagerness of Bengalis who were keen to see the first Bengali bioscope company’s first film”. [Translation Mine]<sup>88</sup>

However, Mukherjee continues, the films were not successful – and he gives his reasons thus: the story was *aajgubi* (unreal, far-fetched) and the acting was an imitation of English films. He also says the story was neither of traditional

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<sup>85</sup> Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, 30.

<sup>86</sup> ICCE, vol. II, 641.

<sup>87</sup> These counter quotes also suggest ruptures within the category of the *bhadralok*. “The *Bhadralok* and their search for ‘good’ cinema,” unpublished paper on *Chandidas*, presented at the Eleventh International Domitor Conference, Toronto 2010.

<sup>88</sup> Sourindramohan Mukherjee, “Bangla Bioscope,” *Bharati* (August 1923), reprinted in ed. Sugata Sinha, *Jugopat* 2, no. 2, (2004): 35.

Bengali society, nor did it depict anglicised society, and hence neither group could identify with it. And thus the company ran at a loss and had to wind up.<sup>89</sup>

Mukherjee's comments are a refreshing insight into contemporary perceptions of a film that has been eulogized by later historians, suggesting that a re-evaluation is necessary. This brings into question the pronouncements in the ICCE on the commercial success and popularity of these films. A revisiting of these pronouncements makes clear one glaring fact: we hear of the success of these films from the filmmakers and the producers, who would have had a clear interest in promoting their films in front of the Committee in an effort to influence policy, and persuade the Committee to come down hard on the Madans. These claims are not backed up by evidence of box office figures - the ICC is not shown any evidence of returns. All individuals and representative groups who appeared in the ICC had a strong interest in constructing a very specific public image of themselves and their respective institutions. After all, responding to the ICC questionnaire and appearance before the Committee was voluntary, not obligatory, a point discussed further in Chapter 3.

I would also venture to suggest that this contradiction emerged due to the retrospective processes of film historiography, which uncritically reiterated the posturing in the contemporary material and the assertions circulating within the industries in Bombay and Calcutta. Further, as discussed above, films like *Bilet Pherat* were celebrated because of their nationalist strands. A film was legitimated if its content served the nationalist cause, and since the official history has for long privileged the nationalist narrative these films and personalities find repeated mention.

The majority of these companies from the early phase of Calcutta cinema dissolved, and while Aurora continued production of features, its main focus was informational films for the government. The only company that survived this early phase and continued regular feature-length production was Madan Theatres Ltd. Despite facing criticism for the quality of its films the company flourished as

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

much for its financial backing as its strategic business planning and organisation. Throughout the 1920s Madan Theatres' dominance of the Calcutta film industry was absolute and they steadfastly gained ground, while several much-hyped companies came and went.

The Madans' mode of operation stands in stark contrast to the somewhat haphazard initiatives of start-up companies in the early years of the feature film industry in Calcutta. A typical case in point is the production initiatives of budding young actor Ahindra Choudhury and his friend, Prafulla Ghosh. Both Choudhury and Ghosh went on to find individual success later in life. Choudhury became a renowned theatre and film actor in Calcutta, and Ghosh went on to make several films in Bombay but, as we see below, their collective production venture failed miserably. This story of a small production house has not made it into any of the mainstream histories of film in Calcutta – indeed the one film that they produced was barely noticed. Yet, the following detailed account of their production endeavours offers a stark insight into the troubles and traumas of entering the nascent film industry in Calcutta in the late teens, and gives us a flavour of the might of the Madans, showcasing the enormity of their achievements.

### **2.3.2 ARTISANAL MODE OF PRODUCTION: Photoplay Syndicate of India and the Desire for Organised Production**

Ahindra Choudhury's detailed account of his attempts to produce a film in the early 1920s is illustrative of the rather erratic and haphazard manner of operation of some of these small start-up companies. The young Choudhury, then unemployed, and Prafulla Ghosh, who was then an accountant, decided to produce a film together around 1920.<sup>90</sup> Choudhury started writing a screenplay of Tagore's 1887 play, *Sacrifice (Bisarjan)*. Their inexperience is evident in the story of their search for a suitable producer. They scoured the telephone directory to look for names of the companies and wrote directly to ask for financial and infrastructural support. First they contacted *India Films* but were

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<sup>90</sup> Choudhury, *Nijere Haraye Khunji* vol. I, 210.

informed that the company was only involved in distribution. Clueless, Choudhury then enquired for names of producers in Calcutta, and pat came the reply – the Madans. The duo were not impressed with the Madan films and so decided not to approach them; instead they contacted Aurora Film Company. At this time Aurora's first feature *Ratnakar*, was under production. Choudhury says they were given a warm reception by Aurora and saw rushes but were not very happy with the quality. So finally they approached the Madans with their screenplay.

Rustomji and Framjee<sup>91</sup> were immediately interested in making a Tagore film, keenly aware of the immense status and following it would bring to their dwindling image, especially from the Bengali elite. The problem though was rights and the Madans asked Choudhury to acquire the film rights from Tagore. This was a big jolt for the unseasoned duo because the question of rights had not occurred to them. In the end they were unable to obtain the requisite film rights and that resulted in Choudhury writing an original story for their first and only film, *Soul of a Slave* (1922).

Choudhury and Ghosh teamed up with Charles Creed to photograph the film. Creed was of Armenian descent and hailed from Bangalore. He came to Calcutta as an electrician in the Theatre Royal - the same Theatre Royal that had been the venue for Calcutta's first Cinematograph screening. After the theatre burnt down in 1911, Creed went to work for a Mr. Du-Casse, who owned and managed several cinema theatres in Calcutta. From Choudhury's accounts we learn that by then Creed had been the cinematographer for several short films including a 2-reel comedy produced by Du-Casse, and a documentary, *Darjeeling*, produced by the owner of the Grand Hotel in Calcutta, Arratoon Stephen.<sup>92</sup> According to

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<sup>91</sup> Rustomji Dotiwalla was J. F. Madan's son-in-law and was largely responsible for establishing and expanding the Madan film business, from its inception until his death in June 1931. Framjee was J. F. Madan's second son, who repeatedly toured Europe for machinery and expertise, and was instrumental in getting de Liguoro to produce films for Madan Theatres.

<sup>92</sup> Stephen had commissioned the publicity film to attract European tourists to his hotel in Darjeeling. This reference alludes to the presence of parallel filmic practices, which we know little about today. See Chapter 3 for more on Stephen and Du-Casse.

Choudhury, Creed bought camera equipment and set up his own laboratory with the money he made from this film.<sup>93</sup>

Choudhury's detailed recollection gives us a very good glimpse into prevailing production practices. For shooting and editing the film Creed charged a rupee and two annas per foot.<sup>94</sup> This rate included the price of raw film and of chemicals, laboratory charges and Creed's technical fee. In return, Choudhury and Ghosh were to get the negative and one positive print. Choudhury says that, given Creed's "competence", the rate quoted by him was very low.<sup>95</sup> Choudhury's comment suggests that in the nascent industry it was not easy to come across technical expertise in the city and thus, by comparison, Creed was an experienced filmmaker. We know that he could not have worked on feature films by this time, thus Creed's experience would have been built up from making short films. This anecdote alludes to another lost history of production – that of shorts from the late 1890s onwards. While history only remembers Sen and Madan, there was clearly far more production going on in Calcutta.

Next, the question of finance arose. They budgeted 18,000 rupees for the film. Two-thirds of this money was loaned from a local bookmaker on condition that both Choudhury and Ghosh invested the rest of the money. Ghosh gave two thousand rupees, borrowed another two thousand from his brother and the remaining two thousand was given by Choudhury's father.<sup>96</sup>

Their next step was to construct a studio. They leased two and a half *bighas* of land (36,000 square feet) in a village just outside the southern fringes of Calcutta, east of Behala, at 65 rupees per annum. Choudhury himself supervised the building of the studio, modelling it on Fox's Ferndale Studio in Long Island. He gives a detailed account of creating the blueprint of their studio after long hours of consultation and study of the building plan of Ferndale.

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<sup>93</sup> Creed comes across as another crucial figure in the Calcutta industry. He worked at Madan Theatres right until the company dissolved and then moved to Bharat Lakshmi Studios.

<sup>94</sup> An anna was one-sixteenth of a rupee.

<sup>95</sup> Choudhury, *Nijere Haraye Khunji* vol. I, 224

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* 225-7

Through all these months Choudhury and Ghosh saw a large number of films at Du-Casse's theatre and discussed them in detail. They also studied film stills and read imported books, trade magazines from Hollywood, and whatever else they could lay their hands on. The close association with Creed, Hem Mukherjee<sup>97</sup> and Universal Film Company<sup>98</sup> meant that they had easy access to both films and a wealth of magazines and publicity materials. In his memoirs Choudhury fondly recalls these daily conversations and says that his routine was to oversee the construction of the studio in the mornings, sit in their city office in the afternoons and visit Creed at Picture House every evening to view films and discuss filmmaking methods and techniques. Choudhury claims that these sessions were his learning ground and his original script went through several changes through these months.

Given its novelty there was little expertise in film production available in Calcutta in 1920. But there was no dearth of talent in the other arts. The company advertised in newspapers for an artist to make detailed sketches of the screenplay and sets.<sup>99</sup> They approached a former theatre director – a former manager of Gaiety Theatre, Calcutta, an unnamed *saheb*, to direct the film. But the fee quoted by this former theatre director was very high and finally they requested Hem Mukherjee, the manager of Picture House, to step in as director.<sup>100</sup> To save money they decided not to opt for professional actors and act in the roles themselves. But the problem was finding actresses:

“A Bengali girl would not quite suit the role. Here, it is better to follow the Madans. What was required was a graceful figure, a foreigner or an Anglo-Indian (*bideshini* or *phiringi*). They don't need to speak, so where's the problem?”<sup>101</sup> [Translation Mine]

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<sup>97</sup> Manager of Du-casse's cinema, sports journalist and editor of a weekly broadsheet.

<sup>98</sup> Choudhury, *Nijere Haraye Khunji* vol. I, 229. Choudhury says that Photoplay Syndicate sublet a part of their city office to Universal. This was, in all likelihood, the country office of the Hollywood major, for distributing their films in India. Barnouw and Krishnaswamy mentions that Universal set up an office in Calcutta in 1916. See Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, 298.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 230

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 239

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 240

They advertised for the two main female parts in *The Statesman*, in order to attract “*bideshini* or *phiringi*” actresses.<sup>102</sup> The lady chosen for the main role of Romola was a French tourist travelling with her husband: the couple had decided to stay on in Calcutta for some time while she completed shooting for the part. However, her husband was urgently recalled to France soon after and the search for Romola was renewed. Hem Mukherjee decided to look out for suitable girls to play the part from among the women audience visiting his cinema. Finally, around autumn 1921, Mukherjee stumbled on Adelle Wilson-Wirth, an Australian circus performer and daughter of the owner of Wilson Circus.<sup>103</sup> Wilson-Wirth had come to Calcutta with the circus and was signed for the film on a contract of Rs 500.<sup>104</sup>

For the other female role of Ila they cast June Richards, an English actress who worked in Bandmann’s Theatre Company.<sup>105</sup> June Richards had acted in several variety shows in England, and had also done a few small parts in films, and hence was considered a professional. Choudhury says that since the role was small she agreed to it for Rs 300.<sup>106</sup> Through this anecdote the interplay between a range of performance forms is again apparent in these early days of film production.

The smaller female roles proved to be less of a worry, says Choudhury, for they could be “selected from among the prostitutes”.<sup>107</sup> This casual statement of Choudhury’s cannot be easily dismissed. Prostitutes were social outcasts in the strictly hierarchical Bengali society of the time. Since Indian women were not allowed to appear publicly, finding actresses posed a big problem for theatre organisers. The first Public Theatre directors of Calcutta got around the problem by casting teenage boys in the role of women. By the late nineteenth century, in the heyday of Public Theatre in Calcutta, prostitutes were cast as actresses in the interests of ‘realism’ on the stage. This posed a moral dilemma for Bengali society, with fears that the image of Bengali Public Theatre would be tarnished and respectable actors, writers and directors would be tainted by working in close

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Later known as Wilson Wirth’s Circus. Wilson’s Circus regularly performed in Calcutta in the winter months. Ibid., 242.

<sup>104</sup> Choudhury, *Nijere Haraye Khunji* vol. I, 243.

<sup>105</sup> The company was owned by Maurice Bandmann, mentioned above, and performed regularly in Empire Theatre (now Roxy cinema).

<sup>106</sup> Choudhury, *Nijere Haraye Khunji* vol. I, 241.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 240.

proximity with the women.<sup>108</sup> This continued to be a serious point of contention in the world of public performance in Calcutta, as elsewhere in South Asia, and both theatre and films had to deal with the moral fears of elite and middle class Indian society. There was a concerted effort at casting women from respectable families both on stage and screen – by D. G. and Modhu Bose, for example, both of whom convinced friends and family to allow their girls to act on stage. Modhu Bose in particular extensively discusses his efforts towards this in his autobiography.

The decision to work with prostitutes would certainly have been frowned on by the families of Choudhury and Ghosh. Actor Dhiraj Bhattacharya's experience on entering films is illustrative of the severe social castigation that young men from middle class families had to face on joining films. Bhattacharya, who started his career in the film *Sati Lakshmi* (released 7/11/1925), says that when his mother heard of his decision to act in the cinema she went on a hunger strike proclaiming:

“...he will paint his face and dance with those streetwalkers... I will not accept this while I am alive....”<sup>109</sup> [Translation Mine]

And after the film was released Bhattacharya says that he became an outcast at home:

“Many relatives came and insulted my parents saying things like - you have consciously pushed your son towards destruction by stopping his education. Have you realised that after this it will be difficult for you to stand up with your head held high in society?”<sup>110</sup> [Translation Mine]

Choudhury's account is reminiscent of the importance of personal networks in the creation of this industry – in the manner in which he and his partner, Prafulla Ghosh, went about learning the ropes of filmmaking, arranged for finance, actors, and brought on board Creed, Hem Mukherjee etc. to create an entire production team. These networks, seen from the 1910s and in the formation of Aurora for example, continued to be extremely important in the functioning of the industry even when it matured, as we will see in later chapters.

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<sup>108</sup> Several articles in the contemporary journals debated the issue.

<sup>109</sup> Bhattacharya, *Jakhan Police Chhilam*, 14.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15.

Looking back at Choudhury's vivid descriptions, the mode of operation comes across as both random and systematic at once. Choudhury and Ghosh spent the better part of two years going about the pre-production, looking for finance, for infrastructure and expertise, building a studio, bringing together a crew and a cast. And all the while they continued studying the medium, refining their screenplay, thinking about new ways of shooting scenes etc. Their approach was methodical but the barriers were possibly too many for their meagre resources and influences. They did not have enough finances to see them through. There was no production infrastructure that they could depend on and they spent most of their money building the infrastructure. To complicate matters further, Charles Creed decided to join Madan Theatres while the edit was underway. In the absence of Creed much of the editing was finished by Choudhury.

This detailed account of production also gives us an insight into the mode of operation of other start-up companies in the early 1920s, even the likes of D. G., as the mode of amassing finance is similar. It could be said that D. G.'s Indo-British Company survived for longer than Photoplay Syndicate because D. G. commanded a higher social standing and was thus able to tap into a more influential and wealthy network. Further, Indo-British was also able to organise an entirely new exhibition space to screen their film, unlike Choudhury and Ghosh.

As an independent production company access to distribution was negligible and hence Photoplay Syndicate handed the film over to Madan Theatres for distribution. Significantly, Choudhury and Ghosh had started work on their film before D. G.'s Indo-British had started production, but by the time *Soul of a Slave* released Indo-British had already wound up. From Choudhury's frustrated account it appears that their film was lying in the cans for some time. The film was finally released on August 14, 1922 in Cornwallis, the Madan-owned cinema in the heart of the Bengali town.<sup>111</sup> Choudhury asserts that the Madans did not distribute the film adequately, as it was not their own production, and the film was barely seen. And so, they lost far more than Creed to the might of the Madans;

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<sup>111</sup> Ansu Sur, ed., *Bengali Film Directory*, (Calcutta: Nandan, West Bengal Film Centre, 1999). Hereafter Nandan Directory.

they lost out to Madan Theatres' more organised infrastructure that saw a film from pre-production right through to its end with an assured and extended circulation that helped to popularise the film and its makers and bring in profits.

### **2.3.3 THE MADAN COMPANY: The Making of an Institution**

Jamshedji Framjee Madan (1856-1923) started his working life as a young teenager in a Parsi theatre company in Bombay, doing odd jobs. From such humble beginnings he graduated to acting in small roles in plays. Around 1875, Madan travelled to Calcutta as an actor with one such Parsi theatre company, Elphinstone Theatre Company, which he later bought over. This was the beginning of a media empire that was to span over four decades and extend across colonial India, including Burma and Ceylon.

According to family sources, J. F. Madan initially made his money buying stocks at auction sales in Karachi. The profits from this venture allowed him to set up an export-import business in Calcutta. Newspapers in Calcutta and Bombay regularly carried advertisements announcing Madan as the sole agent for a wide range of foreign goods, including pharmaceuticals and liquor. Exactly why he decided to settle in Calcutta is not known, but one could deduce that since Calcutta was the capital of the British Raj setting up an agency and obtaining import licenses and contracts from the government was relatively easy. According to his great granddaughter,

“...within a few years he became the leading contractor for the supply and transport of goods..... ‘This lead (sic) to his obtaining a large commissariat order, to supply the army with everything required by it and he established shops every twenty miles from Siliguri to Chembhi. His name was widely known throughout Northern India as the universal provider to the utmost limits of India...’”<sup>112</sup>

This business gave Madan immense wealth; it also gave him access to and experience of trading across India – experience that must surely have fed into the expansion of his cinema business. And significantly, in the trading culture of

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<sup>112</sup> Modi, “Jamshedji Madan,” in Mody ed., *The Parsis in Western India*, 205.

colonial India, it gave him important high-level contacts within the colonial hierarchy, both in the administration and the military, and it is very likely that Madan made use of these contacts to expand the film business. Madan's Elphinstone Bioscope Company obtained the official contract to film the imperial visit to India in 1911, and this could only have been possible because of the immense influence Madan wielded with the government. We are told that Madan was also the official supplier to several former governors and viceroys. An article in the *Commercial Calcutta* gives us a sense of the span and reach of his business:

“The business is one of the largest of its kind in India, as may be inferred by the fact that it gives employment to about 1000 persons.... There are branches of it at Kidderpore, Ballygunge, Darjeeling, Lucknow, Delhi and Bombay. The firm also supplied Field Force Canteens.... The firm are agents for the Asiatic Petroleum Co. (India) Ltd., at Darjeeling, Cawnpore, Delhi, Rae Bareilly, Lucknow, Sandila, Shahjahanpur, Bareilly, Chandausi, Haldwani, Pilibheet, Lakhimpur, Sitapur etc., etc., and at Calcutta and Bombay are wholesale and exclusive distributors of Parke Davis and Co.'s high-class pharmaceutical preparations.... Messrs J. F. Madan export large quantities of Tibet wool, Indian condiments, etc.”<sup>113</sup>

Clearly, Madan was trading all across northern India, starting from the north-east and extending all the way across to the North West Frontier Province (in present-day Pakistan). In looking back at the sketchy material that remains it is possible to start to construct a more detailed account of Madan's film business than that available in received history. First we can conclude that Madan foresaw the potential of film as a lucrative business and thus, during the early 1900s, he added film, and film equipment, to the list of goods he imported and supplied to these territories. As a licensed importer of foreign goods, it would have been easy for him to include both films and film equipment in the list of goods to be imported from London.

Secondly Madan's diversification into film from theatre does not look to be an accident. He appears to be keenly aware of cinema's commodity value as a new mass entertainment form and the expansion of the business can be characterised as systematic and cautious. In 1902 Madan established the first permanent site of

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<sup>113</sup> Article in *Commercial Calcutta* (date not given), quoted in Modi, “Jamshedji Madan,” in Mody ed., *The Parsis in Western India*, 205.

cinema in South Asia: a tent house on the Maidan. There are varying dates offered for this event as well but 1902 is the date given by his son J. J. Madan in the ICCE. However, there is evidence of film screenings at Madan-owned venues like the Corinthian even before this date (see Chapter 3). When the continued success of tent shows proved the viability of cinema as a mass entertainment form, the company built permanent cinemas, starting with the Elphinstone Picture Palace in Calcutta (1907) and slowly spreading across other metropolitan centres in West, South and North India. Madan's other businesses continued alongside and he is said to have made large profits in the War:

“...during the First World War, Jamshedji had earned an income of over a crore of Rupees after paying Income-tax – and that he also permitted no competition!”<sup>114</sup>

This money also funded the expansion of his film business as discussed below. Again, despite having the financial capital, Madan's entry into feature film production appears to be fairly cautious. As mentioned previously, the success of Phalke's films would have alerted his Elphinstone Bioscope Company to the demand for local productions among the masses. They ventured into production with *Satyawadi Raja Harishchandra* (released 24/3/1917) based on a mythological story popular across India. As mentioned earlier, *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) was also the name of Phalke's first film, and a runaway success, so much so that Phalke himself released a remake of his own film in 1917. Elphinstone's version of the film was a screen adaptation of a successful Parsi play and a famous Parsi stage actor, Hormusji Tantra, nicknamed “the Irving of the Indian Stage”, played the lead role in the film.<sup>115</sup> The film's advertisement highlighted the links with the stage play:

“The great dramatic success of the Indian Stage. Adapted for the screen from the famous drama of the same name...”<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid. Regardless of the truth value of this figure, it is entirely possible that the company would have made huge profits from supplying the colonial army during World War I.

<sup>115</sup> Advertisement of the film, reprinted in Nandan Directory.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

Interestingly, the film was released at New Tent, Maidan, not at any of the several permanent cinema theatres J. F. Madan owned in Calcutta by then. This certainly appears to be a guarded move and we can conclude that Madan and Rustomji were using all possible means to ensure crowds for their first production. The New Tent was a regular venue for film shows and had a dedicated audience of its own; in addition Hormusji Tantra's star presence was likely to have been a certain draw for his fans. Besides, it is possible to speculate that the Madans would not want to run the risk of experimenting with the taste of audiences who frequented their permanent cinema theatres and were used to seeing European and American films. And thus, Madan and Rustomji chose to release their first feature film in the New Tent.

The success of this first film would have given the Madans the confidence to start their second production, *Bilwamangal or Bhagat Soordas* (released 1/11/1919). This film, released in Cornwallis Theatre, is sometimes credited as being the first Bengali film. It was based on a Bengali play that was one of the biggest hits of the Bengali stage.

In 1919 J. F. Madan consolidated his entertainment business by launching a new joint stock company, Madan Theatres Ltd. This new company incorporated Elphinstone Bioscope (including Elphinstone Picture Palace and Elphinstone Theatrical Company) and "its flagship organisation", Corinthian Theatre.<sup>117</sup> The advertisements of *Bilwamangal* mention both the old and the new name of the company: thus, Madan Theatres Ltd. is credited as the director, while Elphinstone Bioscope Co. is mentioned as the producer. This was likely to have been for reasons of audience familiarity with the old name.

On reflection, the merger of the film and theatre businesses benefitted their film business greatly, both in the early years and also later when talkie production started. The production of Madan Theatres' early films, in particular, piggybacked on the theatre. The sets of the Corinthian stage were used to shoot their films and the actors came from the theatre companies. Famous Urdu playwrights Aga Hashr

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<sup>117</sup> Modi, "Jamshedji Madan," in Mody ed., *The Parsis in Western India*, 211.

Kashmiri and Betaab, who were on contract to write for the stage, were also drawn in to write scripts for the films. The success of the stage contributed to the popularity of their films and indeed made the Madans so prolific. Several commentators have suggested that the Madan films were essentially filmed recordings of the stage plays. We have no way of confirming whether these were films in their own right as they have not survived. But if this indeed were the case then it allowed the Madans to profit from the plays, essentially ensuring the extended circulation of the plays to audiences across South Asia for repeated viewings. Further, filming the plays, along with gramophone recordings of songs from the plays,<sup>118</sup> also ensured that they were taken to a more popular audience who did not necessarily visit the theatre; and allowed the Madans to extend circulation of their cultural productions outside the cities to the *mofussil* through their travelling tent cinemas.

In the next fifteen years the Madan Company, as it was popularly known in the film and theatre world of Calcutta, produced a large number of feature films in Bengali, Hindi and Urdu. In 1921 alone, Madan Theatres Ltd. released five Bengali films as well as a number of Hindi/Urdu productions.

Looking through the evidence, it is quite clear that the Madan Company was well aware of the cinema's ability to attract audiences through grand sets and sensational scenes. The advertisement for *Bilwamangal* also mentions:

“An unprecedented production...on a scale of exceptional magnificence, sumptuous Scenery and brilliant Costumes.”<sup>119</sup>

Their films were shot on the sets of the Corinthian theatre and hence, in the tradition of Parsi theatre, were grand, baroque. Fairly early on in their production history, the Madans collaborated with foreign cinematographers, directors and actors. In 1921, all five films known to be produced by Madan Theatres were shot

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<sup>118</sup> As discussed above, the Madans were also at the forefront of the gramophone recordings in India. The Gramophone Company's engineer, F. W. Gaisberg, visited India in 1902 and extensively recorded artists from the theatre companies owned by Madan, including the famous singer, Gauhar Jan. These, along with recordings of artists from Classic Theatre, Calcutta, formed the major part of the first series of gramophone recording in India. See Kinnaer, *The Gramophone Company's First Indian Recordings*.

<sup>119</sup> Advertisement of the film, reprinted in Nandan Directory.

by French and Italian cinematographers.<sup>120</sup> This turn to foreign cameramen may have been necessitated by the defection of Madan Theatres' resident cinematographer, Jyotish Sarkar, who had shot the majority of their films, to D. G.'s Indo-British Film Company around 1919/1920. However, the decision to employ Italian cinematographer, Eugenio de Liguoro, in 1921 also appears to have been a deliberate move by the Madans towards a more spectacular visual aesthetic. De Liguoro, who shot two Madan films in 1921, including *Nal Damayanti*, was known for his "Orientalist spectacles".<sup>121</sup> He went on to shoot a four-part serial based on the Indian epic, *Ramayana*, in 1922. By this time Madan also ventured into what was India's first international co-production with Cines, Rome, for the film *Savitri* (1923).<sup>122</sup> The majority of the Madan films from the period signal a preference for the mythological and the fantasy genres, possibly because the stories had a proven mass appeal.<sup>123</sup> Additionally, these genres offered a scope for spectacular sets and costumes:

"To Madan, mythology provided just the kind of outlet a showman needs to parade beautiful women and handsome men against gorgeous settings."<sup>124</sup>

However, mythological was not the only genre the Madans were producing, for not everyone appreciated the grand illusions offered by the Madan mythologicals. Ahindra Choudhury on seeing *Nal Damayanti* writes:

"It's not as if the film was bad; the problem was with the sets (background). Nal and Damayanti's story is undoubtedly a *pauranic* film – a mythological. But the settings around the *pauranic* characters are the marble statues of Omkarmal Jethia's bungalow, the Venetian fountains of Raja Rajendra

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<sup>120</sup> Nandan Directory. The EIC mentions only two of these films and credits de Liguoro as the director; however the Nandan Directory credits Jyotish Banerjee as the director of four of the five films, and Priyanath Ganguly as the director of the fifth film, and also mentions the cinematographers of each film. Madan Theatres may have produced other films that are not mentioned in the Nandan Directory: for instance, *Savitri* (1923), their international co-production, is not mentioned here but discussed in EIC.

<sup>121</sup> EIC, 244.

<sup>122</sup> EIC, 245. Several other international co-productions were to follow in the 1920s and 1930s, including *Light of Asia* (1925), *Shiraz* (1928), *Throw of Dice* (1929) et al. by the Himansu Rai / Franz Osten duo. See EIC.

<sup>123</sup> Nandan Directory.

<sup>124</sup> Aruna Vasudev and P. Lenglet eds., *Indian Cinema Superbazaar* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1983), 20.

Mullick's Marble Palace, and huge Corinthian pillars. Nal and Damayanti looked rather incongruous in these surroundings."<sup>125</sup> [Translation Mine]

The marble statues were undoubtedly European and the choice of the settings, begs the question: were the Madans deliberately feeding into the Orientalist aesthetic, considered to be more international, to attract the Indian elite and also in search of foreign (European) audiences? After all, Italian cinematographers, like De Liguoro, who visualised the films through the Orientalist lense, were invited to work by the Madans. Given that Orientalist films were popular in Hollywood this use of Italian cinematographers to shoot Indian mythologicals reveals an underlying desire by the Madans to explore the potential of the European market in the early 1920s. It need be mentioned here that Himansu Rai's films from the mid-1920s, produced in collaboration with European producers including Emelka, UFA and Bruce Wolf were recognisably Orientalist, and also catered to Western European markets.<sup>126</sup>

The Bengali penchant for realist narratives and mise-en-scene proved to be a hindrance in the appreciation of the Madan films by the *bhadralok*. Such reactions were not totally lost on the Madans: they seem to have been aware of the variegated tastes of different audiences, and did make an effort at winning over the Bengali *bhadralok* with literary adaptations of Bengali novels.

In 1922, even while in the thick of their foreign collaborations, Madan Theatres also released *Bishbriksha*, a literary adaptation of a well-known novel by acclaimed nineteenth century Bengali novelist Bankimchandra Chatterjee. Then, in the mid 1920s, Madan Theatres bought the cinematic rights for all of Bankimchandra's novels for Rs. 22,000,<sup>127</sup> thus preventing any other company from producing these. This decision was, in all likelihood, provoked by perceived competition from one of the newly formed production houses, Indian Kinema Arts, founded by Ghanshyam Das Chokhani. Chokhani approached

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<sup>125</sup> Choudhury, *Nijere Haraye Khunji*, vol. I, 216-217.

<sup>126</sup> For a discussion on orientalist film see Vasudevan, "Geographies of the Cinematic Public: Notes on Regional, National and Global Histories of Indian Cinema." *Journal of the Moving Image* 9 (2010), [http://www.jmionline.org/jmi9\\_6.htm](http://www.jmionline.org/jmi9_6.htm).

<sup>127</sup> Mukherjee, *Bangla Chalachitrer Itihas*, 64-5.

Bankimchandra's descendants for film rights to the novel, *Kapalkundala* but the Madans immediately stepped in and offered to buy the film rights for Bankim's complete collections. In desperation Chokhani offered to pay Rs. 28,000 in instalments for 14 of the Bankim novels; however the Madans were able to offer the family a lump sum at the time and thus won over the rights. This example is a clear indication of Madan Theatres' modus operandi and the efforts to eliminate the competition.

The Madans were also interested in adapting Tagore's works for the screen. Both Ahindra Choudhury and Modhu Bose separately describe how the Madans were immediately interested in producing the Tagore stories when each of them approached the company.<sup>128</sup> As discussed above Choudhury had been unsuccessful in gaining film rights for Tagore's *Sacrifice* in the late teens.<sup>129</sup> Later, Madan Theatres did go on to produce *Giribala* (1930), based on Tagore's short story, *Manbhanjan*. The film was directed by Modhu Bose, in close collaboration with Tagore himself.

However, despite these efforts by the Madans the Bengali elite never could accept the Madan films. The very same Corinthian pillars became a problem on account of the *bhadralok*'s preference for realist mise-en-scene, and the Madan films were severely criticised for their rather 'un-Bengali' costumes and sets.

Actor Ahindra Choudhury says that despite the fact that he and his partner were desperately in search for a producer for their film, *Soul of a Slave*, they were so put off by the aesthetics of the Madan films, especially *Nal Damayanti*, that they decided to produce their film themselves rather than risk abandoning their aesthetic and realistic principles. Madan Theatres was the most prolific producer in Calcutta in these years and there arose a blatant rebellion within the nascent Calcutta industry against the predominant film form of the Madan productions. It is through the articulation of these grievances in contemporary journals that we see the crystallisation of a Bengali identity for the cinema in Calcutta. As

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<sup>128</sup> Choudhury, *Nijere Haraye Khunji*, vol. I, 214; Modhu Bose, *Amar Jiban* (Calcutta: Bak Sahitya, 1967), 140.

<sup>129</sup> It was finally produced by Naval Gandhi in Bombay in 1927 and shown internationally.

mentioned above, at the forefront of these “quality Bengali films” were companies like Taj Mahal, the companies formed by D. G., and later, in the 1930s, New Theatres.

Despite this ill will, however, several educated Bengalis worked with the Madans including actors Ahindra Choudhury and Dhiraj Bhattacharya, director Modhu Bose and iconic Bengali theatre actor/director Shishir Bhaduri. The Madan Company was an institution and although they were not known for the quality of their films they invested heavily in infrastructure, and the large majority of the early creative and technical professionals in Calcutta, as well as in Bombay, worked with the Madans at the beginning of their careers. The salaries offered by the Madans were far higher than what anyone else could offer and the regular income provided a stability that no other film production house was able to offer at the time. Ahindra Choudhury describes the favourable conditions of work at the Madan company in those days:

“...Salaries were given out on a fixed day of the month. The cashier came to the theatre and handed them out after making the employees sign on a voucher. This was unique in those days. It’s as if the theatre had become a government office!”<sup>130</sup> [Translation Mine]

Studying the ebb and flow of the Calcutta industry through the 1920s, we can safely conclude that the Madan company was a haven from the uncertainties of a volatile industry, as discussed below. The technical and creative crew, and the cast, were largely employees of the company, as was the custom with all film production studios at the time. Rarely would the studios get talent on a freelance contract – freelancers would either be big stars, often from the theatre, or very well connected, like Modhu Bose.

Modhu Bose and Dhiraj Bhattacharya describe the Madan studio in their memoirs. Bose describes the studio when he started shooting for Madan Theatres in his first film in 1924.<sup>131</sup> He says that the films were mostly shot on location in daylight – in fields, gardens, river banks, terraces and in the suburban bungalows

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<sup>130</sup> Choudhury, *Nijere Haraye Khunji*, vol. I. 258.

<sup>131</sup> Bose, *Amar Jiban*, 50-51.

of the wealthy. Even in the Madan studio there were no artificial lights and films were shot on sets in natural light, from morning till about three or four in the afternoon. Bhattacharya describes the studio at a slightly later date, during the shooting of his second film, *Kalparinoy* (1930):

“Madan studio at the time was a road going away from the gate, two small tin sheds under mango trees and two small huts adjoining Tollygunge Depot. The rest was all jungle.”<sup>132</sup> [Translation Mine]

Bhattacharya’s description of the studio in 1930 is surprisingly basic given that the Madans had been in production for well over a decade and given their prolific rate of production, especially in comparison with Ahindra Choudhury’s account of his ambitious studio. Yet the starkness of the Madan studio is suggestive of their production practices: we can deduce that the Madan films were primarily shot indoors, on the sets of the Corinthian stage. Outdoor shots would possibly have been used for forest scenes, of which there were aplenty in the mythological stories, or the rural backdrop of huts and trees required for the Bankimchandra adaptations. In the absence of the films one can here speculate that there would have been few wide shots establishing the location.

Bose mentions that his film was shot over three or four months. Lunch for the entire cast and crew was sent from J. J.’s home.<sup>133</sup> The food was good and there was a varied and exciting menu. Bose says: “Our workplace was a large happy family.”<sup>134</sup>

This allusion to the studio as a family points to a feudal organisation structure that was typical of organisations at the time, and certainly of film studios through the studio era.<sup>135</sup> Madan Theatres was the only truly vertically integrated organisation of the silent era, stretching across the length and breadth of South Asia. This gigantic media organisation directly employed several hundred people, ranging from actors, directors, musicians, set designers, scriptwriters, technical crew,

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<sup>132</sup> Bhattacharya, *Jakhan Police Chhilam*, 220.

<sup>133</sup> J. J. was another of the Madan sons, also involved in the running of the business.

<sup>134</sup> Bose, *Amar Jiban*, 51.

<sup>135</sup> Aurora continues with a similar organisational structure until this day, and its present owner uses similar terms to describe his organisation.

assistants, administrative staff etc. Only a handful of personnel involved with the Madan Company, like the well-connected Modhu Bose, worked on contract and had the freedom to work elsewhere. Maintaining these large numbers of personnel on its rolls was a financial drain on the studios and is widely considered to be a significant factor in the demise of the studio era.<sup>136</sup> We see an indication of this through an incident narrated by Bose. Bose was looking for an actress while directing the film *Khyber Falcon* produced by the Punjab Film Corporation. He wanted Lalita Devi (Bonny Bird) as his lead actress and approached the Madans. Bird was on the Madan rolls at the time. J. J. Madan agreed to release Bonny Bird temporarily for *Khyber Falcon* as it would allow Madan Theatres to save the expense of her salary for a few months.<sup>137</sup> This was around 1930 – an indication that already not all was well with the mighty Madans.

#### **2.3.4 INDEPENDENTS FIND IT TOUGH**

While Madan Theatres Ltd. remained a towering institution throughout the 1920s a number of smaller companies came and went. Very few of them survived and some later merged with each other, or with existing companies to form larger groups in the 1930s. Bengali film historian Kalish Mukherjee lists a total of 34 silent film companies in Calcutta. Of these only nine had been formed by 1929, suggesting that 25 feature film production companies were formed between 1929 and 1931/32 when sound was introduced.<sup>138</sup> This surge in production units was mirrored in Bombay as well.

Needless to say, many of these production companies were one film wonders. Typically several people got together, arranged some finance, floated a company and made a film. The film either did not find sufficient distribution channels and therefore no returns (as in the case of Photoplay Syndicate discussed above), or the partners of the company disagreed, and the company packed up (as in the case

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<sup>136</sup> The Bombay studios too had a similar organisational structure. See “From Monopoly to Commodity: The Bombay Studios in the 1930s,” in *History on/and/in Film*, eds., T. O’Regan and Brian Shoemith, (Perth: History and Film Association of Australia, 1987), 68-75.

<sup>137</sup> Bose, *Amar Jiban* 151.

<sup>138</sup> This list, however, does not take into account D. G. ’s Lotus Film Company, which produced several films in Hyderabad between 1922 and 1924.

of Indo-British discussed previously). The technical and creative crew moved on to form new links and new companies.

For instance, Hiren Bose, directed one silent film, *Hush/Chup* (1931) for a company called Unique Picture Corporation. He then went on to write the story and screenplay for *Mirabai* (sound; producer New Theatres; released 11/11/1933), and also worked for Madan writing the story and lyrics for *Joydeb* (sound, producer Madan Theatres; released 8/12/1933).

The other setback for many of these companies was that they started out at the end of the silent period. While they invested heavily in equipment when forming the companies they could not foresee the arrival of talking pictures, and by the time their films were released the technology had become redundant. The films lost out at the box office to the new lure of the talkie film, and hence made it difficult for small companies to stay afloat. In this volatile environment the companies were left with little money, or did not wish to lose more money, and invest in new equipment yet again.

As a result, the majority of the silent film companies were liquidated and the people got together under new banners. The teams from Arya Films, International Film Kraft and Barua Film Unit joined to form New Theatres in the early 1930s. Many personnel from Graphic Arts and Eastern Film Syndicate also subsequently joined New Theatres.

Even somewhat larger production houses, like Indian Kinema Arts, disappeared after the coming of sound. Indian Kinema Arts, formed by Chokhani in 1927, had its own studio and laboratory and made seven or eight silent films between 1927 and 1932.<sup>139</sup> But after this, there is no mention of this company and many of its personnel are found on the credits of films produced by several big sound studios.

Even in the thirties, the “glorious era of Bengali cinema” according to Kalish Mukherjee,<sup>140</sup> it was difficult for independent initiatives to flourish. Modhu Bose

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<sup>139</sup> Mukherjee, *Bangla Chalachchitrer Itihas*, 64.

<sup>140</sup> Mukherjee, *Bangla Chalachchitrer Itihas*, 356.

mentions launching a new company in the early sound era, with friends funding the venture. But their first film, *One Fatal Night*, based on a story by Maulana Azad, bombed at the box office and that ended the company.<sup>141</sup> Bose says it was the worst experience of his life, and after this he approached several big producers for his next film, *Alibaba* (1937) and, although he was a well-known director, several producers turned him down. As many independent filmmakers discovered along the way movie production was an expensive and risky venture and required planning and solid financial backing – one that could only be provided by more organised companies.

#### **2.4 THE STUDIO ERA: Industrial Mode of Production**

The move towards a more organised industry had, in effect, started in the late 1920s when investment poured into the film industry in Calcutta. The money flowing in was old money (nobility and landed gentry) and new money from businessmen (Bengali and Marwari) and from the new elite classes of Bengal (doctors, attorney generals etc.). While start-up companies were formed and dissolved several big studios were set up in a systematic, planned manner, on the lines of the Hollywood studios and perhaps taking a cue from Madan Theatres' success as a vertically integrated studio.

Of the big studios that formed in the late silent era, with ambitious plans, British Dominion Films and Barua Film Unit had some of the most celebrated names of the Calcutta industry attached to them. D. G., the much talked about film director from the early silent period was at the forefront of these initiatives, setting up British Dominion Films in 1929, while the iconic P. C. Barua set up the Barua Film Unit, that same year. Another major reorganisation in 1929 was that of the fledgling Aurora Cinema Company into the grand-sounding Aurora Film Corporation. The received literature does not accord Aurora much space, yet I would argue that Aurora was the most significant studio established in this period, for reasons that will become clearer in the following two chapters.

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<sup>141</sup> Bose, *Amar Jiban*, 200-201.

### 2.4.1 LATE SILENT ERA STUDIOS

**British Dominion Films Ltd.** was registered as a company on January 7, 1929. The board of directors included an impressive list of names: Dhirendranath Ganguly (D. G.), as Managing Director; Pramathesh Barua, prince of Gauripur; the Raja of Puri; the Raja of Khariar; the Raja of Patna; Smt Tarubala Sen; Dr. N. N. Mukherjee and K. C. Roychoudhury.<sup>142</sup> The studio was inaugurated on May 21, 1929 by the Mayor of Calcutta.

As is apparent, the company had financial and social backing, with several high profile names attached to the studio. After the disappointments of Indo-British Film Co. and Lotus Films, it appears that DG was determined to make a success out of this latest venture and went about forming the company in an organised manner. He sold shares to several wealthy and well-known people including *zamindars* (landed gentry) and civil society leaders - people with money, resources, contacts and social standing. For their first film, *Flames of Flesh/Kamanar Agun* (1929), DG shot in the backdrop of the Amber Palace in Jaipur, with horses and elephants of the Maharaja of Jaipur.<sup>143</sup>

Between 1929 and 1931, the company produced eight films. While the Madan Company can be considered as the training ground for cinema technicians, British Dominion Films nurtured talented directors, writers, technical crew and actors. The company employed around 200 people,<sup>144</sup> and tried to convince educated young ladies to act in films.<sup>145</sup> As discussed above, nearly all stage and cinema actresses at the time came from the margins: from red-light areas or from poor Anglo-Indian families. In an effort to uphold propriety the company made a concerted effort to introduce educated actresses on Calcutta screens. This, according to historian Kalish Mukherjee, was a crucial contribution of the company. However, British Dominion Films could not withstand the technological revolution brought about by the arrival of the talkies and it was dissolved at the end of the silent era.

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<sup>142</sup> Mukherjee, *Bangla Chalachchitrer Itihas*, 59.

<sup>143</sup> Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, 30.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>145</sup> This was an important step given the discourse around respectability that underlined the film industry. D. G., Modhu Bose and others made a concerted effort to involve women in their own families to act in films.

Apart from investing in British Dominion Films the iconic Pramathesh Barua, the prince of Gauripur in Assam, had also acted in a couple of films. Director Modhu Bose claims that Barua dropped in occasionally on his shoots, and the two had engaged in many discussions on the cinema.<sup>146</sup> Not content with this marginal involvement Barua travelled to Elstree studios in London to observe and study filmmaking. Armed with this experience he travelled to Paris to buy lighting equipment – a significant decision as until then films in Calcutta were not shot in artificial light.<sup>147</sup> Barua then returned to Calcutta to form the **Barua Film Unit** (circa 1930), funded by family and friends, and got on board Debaki Bose to direct their first film, *Aparadhi* (1931). *Aparadhi* was the first film in Calcutta shot in artificial light, and is reported to have received critical acclaim.<sup>148</sup> But, by the end of 1931, the talkie had taken Calcutta audiences by storm. Madan Theatres had already produced several Bengali, Hindi and Urdu sound films; while New Theatres was getting ready to release its first sound film. Barua's funding was drying up as well:

“Barua was no more ready for sound than British Dominion Films had been. His film activities had angered his father, the Rajah of Gauripur, who declined to help him. The Prince's ample living allowance, along with his loans and investments by friends, had given him a start. But his plans and ambitions called for firmer footing. In the end Barua, like Ganguly and Bose, threw in his lot with New Theatres.”<sup>149</sup>

Barua made another silent film, *Bengal 1983*, but it was released by New Theatres a year later, after adding sound. Barely a year and a half after forming his ambitious company Barua sold it off to Aurora, and joined B. N. Sircar's New Theatres.

In contrast to these two studios the **Aurora Film Corporation**, also floated in 1929, boasted a longer genealogy going back to 1909/11, as a travelling cinema. The Aurora Film Corporation was formed by Anadi Bose, the co-owner of Aurora Cinema Company, along with G. Ramaseshan as managing partner. This new

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<sup>146</sup> Bose, *Amar Jiban*, 139.

<sup>147</sup> Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, 78.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

company was purportedly to be involved in production, distribution, exhibition and the laboratory business.<sup>150</sup> In 1931, Aurora acquired Barua Pictures Ltd., including its equipment and studio space.<sup>151</sup> By 1936, Aurora had built its own sound studio in north Calcutta.

The question that arises is why Bose felt the need to float a new company when the old one was involved in all of these above-mentioned aspects of the film trade. One possible reason could be because the partnership with Debi Ghosh, Aurora's chief creative person, fell through. Aurora Cinema Company's last feature film had been released in 1927 and a study of the filmography reveals that, since then, Debi Ghosh finds mention, as photographer and director, of two films released in 1930, both produced by two other companies,<sup>152</sup> thus suggesting that Debi Ghosh had moved on. Another reason for floating a new company could have been that Bose wanted to expand the business and perhaps separate the feature film business from the information films business. This point will be taken up for further discussion in the following chapter.

Aurora Film Corp. produced two feature films in the silent era. Debi Ghosh is not credited for these; instead these films were photographed by Dhiren Dey.<sup>153</sup> The studio also produced just one short sound film, *Shibaratri* (1936), in Bengali in the 1930s. Despite building a new sound studio Aurora did not produce any further Bengali feature film until 1940 when they released *Abhinaba*. However, although Aurora produced only three feature-length films in Bengali through the entire decade, the studio appears to have wielded considerable influence within the Calcutta industry in the 1930s. Its proprietor, Anadi Bose, was elected as the first president of the Bengal Motion Picture Association (BMPA) in 1939. The reasons for Aurora's vital position and its significant contribution to the film industry in Calcutta will be enquired into in subsequent chapters.

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<sup>150</sup> Mukherjee, *Bangla Chalachchitrer Itihas*, 55.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid. Mukherjee gives the date as 1930 but it is more likely to have been 1931, after the release of *Aparadhi*.

<sup>152</sup> Nandan Directory. These films were *Bishyutbarer Barbela* (3 reel comedy, directed, photographed) produced by Provincial Film Producers – the only film made by this company, and released at Crown (no release date). The other film shot by him was *Bigraha* produced by Graphic Arts, director Charu Roy, released 29/11/30 at Purna.

<sup>153</sup> These included *Pujari* (released 14/11/1931), directed by Niranjan Pal,<sup>153</sup> and *Niyoti*, the last silent film released in Calcutta, directed by Jogesh Chowdhury (released 15/9/1934 at Jupiter).

The late 1920s was a volatile period in the history of the Calcutta film industry. While the industry rapidly expanded, the introduction of sound in 1931 temporarily arrested growth crippling both big and small alike. Apart from Madan Theatres, the only silent era studio from the 1920s to have survived the onslaught and continue into the sound era was Aurora.

## **2.5 THE SOUND ERA**

The entry of the talkie, while generating much excitement within the industry, came as a rude financial shock to many of these companies, demanding a technological overhaul.<sup>154</sup> Unable to compete and upgrade to the new technology, the silent era companies dissolved and creative and technical people left to join the newly formed sound studios as employees. In spite of teetering on the edge, the injection of capital allowed the industry to overcome the volatility of the 1920s and attain stability through mergers and acquisitions. With the exception of Madan Theatres and Aurora, this was the first time that several production houses in Calcutta enjoyed a sustained period of existence. Interestingly, the studio era saw the involvement of ‘non-Bengali’<sup>155</sup> capital in a big way in the so-called ‘Bengali’ film industry in Calcutta, primarily from Marwari businessmen, including Chamaria, Chokhani and Khemka. This is in sharp contrast to the earlier decade, when the Bengali elite had strong reservations against the involvement of ‘non-Bengali’ businessmen in the industry, but perhaps these anxieties stemmed from elsewhere, as discussed in the following chapter.

In hindsight 1929 appears to be a significant year in the history of the Calcutta industry. The year saw two big companies start up – British Dominion Films and Aurora Film Corporation – the first much discussed, while the other virtually unnoticed. By the early 1930s, the big sound studios were established by consolidating many of the smaller players in the market. The six big names of the studio era in Calcutta include Madan and Aurora continuing from the silent era;

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<sup>154</sup> The only companies ready for sound appear to have been Madan Theatres and B. N. Sircar’s New Theatres.

<sup>155</sup> Non-Bengali is a term with currency in Calcutta and denotes locals who do not speak the Bengali language.

and the newly formed New Theatres (1931), East India Film Company (1932), Radha Films (1933) and Bharatlakshmi Studios (1934).

### 2.5.1 THE END OF MADAN THEATRES

Madan Theatres was the first to cash in on the sound era and introduced sound to Indian cinemas as early as 1928, screening Universal's *Melody of Love* (1928).<sup>156</sup> The Madans invested heavily into sound, building a sound studio in Calcutta and equipped several of its theatres across South Asia with audio projection systems. Then characteristically, as they did with their first feature, the Madans tested the waters by producing and screening short films with sound, primarily scenes from plays, school girls singing, a worshipping lady, a speech by Nobel Laureate Sir C. V. Raman etc.<sup>157</sup>

Their first sound feature film, *Shirin Farhad*, was released in 1931, just a few days after *Alam Ara*, India's first sound feature, was released in Bombay.<sup>158</sup> *Shirin Farhad* was a runaway success and trumped *Alam Ara* at the box office, primarily due to its superior sound recording (on RCA Photophone equipment), the dialogues written by resident Madan playwright and screenwriter Aga Hashr Kashmiri and its numerous songs - 42 songs according to some sources. Through the rest of 1931, Madan Theatres released two talkie films in Bengali and several in Hindi/Urdu.

In all, the Madans produced seven Bengali sound films between 1931 and 1933 and many more Hindi/Urdu talkies. The exact number of these is not known, as discussed earlier, as they are not included in Bengali filmographies; neither do the Hindi/Urdu films produced by the Madans appear in Bombay filmographies since they are seen to be Calcutta productions. Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, based on *Indian Talkie 1931-56 Silver Jubilee Souvenir*, lists the total Madan sound feature

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<sup>156</sup> EIC, 139.

<sup>157</sup> Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, 67.

<sup>158</sup> EIC, 139; Ibid.

releases at eight films in 1931, and sixteen in 1932.<sup>159</sup> This suggests that the bulk of the Madan sound films were made in Hindi/Urdu for a pan-Indian audience.

In 1932, Madan Theatres produced *Indrasabha*, an epic production that went on to become a superhit across India. The film, based on the exceedingly popular nineteenth century Parsi play, was 211 minutes long and included 71 songs “many of which were already familiar from stage shows and gramophone recordings.”<sup>160</sup> The well-known singing duo, Nissar and Kajjan from *Shirin Farhad* (1931), were repeated in *Indrasabha* (1932), and all of these reasons guaranteed the film’s popularity with Hindi and Urdu speaking audiences. In addition, the Madans recalled another Italian cinematographer, T. Marconi, to shoot the film. Marconi had earlier shot the silent film *Kapal Kundala* (1929) for Madan Theatres.<sup>161</sup> The EIC states that Madan asked Marconi “to model the choral *mise en scene* on the venerable Italian epics.”<sup>162</sup>

Interestingly, Rangoonwalla rejects the Madan sound films as films, echoing the censure in the 1920s by the Bengali elite. Rangoonwalla asserts that “the early talkies were simply filmed stageplays;...” even while acknowledging that these films were “some of the biggest musical hits in 1931-34”.<sup>163</sup> Parsi stage productions of *Indrasabha* entailed spectacular sets and the film would certainly have borrowed this, the music and the singing stars from the stage. However, cinematic spectacle made possible through Marconi’s use of the camera belies Rangoonwalla’s dismissal. A top-angle still of dancers from the 1932 film suggests that Marconi’s cinematography topped the theatrical spectacle through stunning scenes, costumes and dance numbers and can be considered a film in its own right.<sup>164</sup> To dismiss the 1932 film as a filmed version of the stage-play is to ignore the specificity of the filmic medium and the translational processes of

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Kathryn Hansen, “The *Indar Sabha* Phenomenon: Public Theatre and Consumption in Greater India (1853-1956),” in *Pleasure and the Nation: The History, Politics and Consumption of Public Culture in India*, eds. Rachel Dwyer and Christopher Pinney, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 105, quoting from Rangoonwalla, *A Pictorial History*, 40 (see below).

<sup>161</sup> Nandan Directory.

<sup>162</sup> EIC, 255.

<sup>163</sup> Firoze Rangoonwalla, *A Pictorial History of Indian Cinema* (London: Hamlyn Publishing Group, 1979), 71.

<sup>164</sup> Hansen, “The *Indar Sabha* Phenomenon,” 106.

cinematic adaptation, even while drawing from the literary text and the stage-play. It also does not recognise Marconi's contribution through cinematography, or the Madan brothers' vision and initiative in producing the film on a grand scale.

Further, the Madans' use of numerous songs within films reveals a deliberate invoking of intertextuality with the Parsi stage and the music industry - a crossing over of several media forms seen particularly in the Madan feature films, right from the company's very first film in 1917. As Rangoonwalla's quote above points out, the songs had already had an extensive life of their own in the growing music industry, and Nissar and Kajjan were already well-established singers of the Parsi stage. The attraction of the new talking pictures, the lure of the songs by Nissar and Kajjan, the spectacular cinematography of the 71 songs and dances, along with the draw of the very popular narrative all helped to make Madan Theatres' *Indrasabha* a resounding success across South Asia.

This use of intertextuality was not peculiar to the Madans; rather, it had become an intrinsic practice within the burgeoning Calcutta industry. The first indigenous films consisted of scenes and dances from the theatre (e.g. Hiralal Sen's *Flower of Persia*) and, as discussed earlier in this chapter, several producers fell back on popular theatre and literature through the 1920s in the hope of getting in audiences into the cinema theatre. Sound simply made this intertextuality easier. In the perception of the industry, and of contemporary commentators, the dramatic form of Parsi theatre (in the case of the Madan talkies) or the dramatic form of the Bengali Public theatre (in the case of New Theatres and other Bengali films) could realise their full cinematic potential through the use of dialogue, poetry and music. This explains the emphasis on dialogue, psychological realism and such like that we see cropping up in the contemporary journals of the time. It also explains the common use of playwrights and literary writers as screenwriters in the early talkie era. Further, as discussed in Chapter 1, music was integral to traditional performative forms like the *jatra*, as well as an important element of modern performance forms like the Bengali Public Theatre and the Parsi theatre. By the early twentieth century Calcutta was a key centre of emergent Hindustani classical music and, by the time sound came into the cinema, Calcutta boasted a flourishing music recording industry and was home to the Gramophone Company

of India<sup>165</sup> as well as one of two Indian radio broadcasting stations.<sup>166</sup> As Michael Kinnear has pointed out, the Madans were involved with the Gramophone Company's music recordings in India from the earliest days, with the visit of F. W. Gaisberg in 1902. A vast majority of the Indian artists recorded by Gaisberg were employees of the Corinthian and Classic theatre companies, including the acclaimed singer, Gauhar Jan.<sup>167</sup> All of these factors made the extensive use of music within films not only possible but also a potentially lucrative addendum.

As discussed above, filming the plays, along with the gramophone recordings, also ensured that they were taken to a more popular audience – an audience that did not necessarily visit the theatre. It allowed the Madans to extend the circulation of their films, and their plays, outside the cities to the *mofussil* and rural areas with the help of travelling cinemas. As Kathryn Hansen suggests, these film screenings of *Indrasabha* helped to popularise its songs and scenes:

“As popular entertainment, these shows were a direct continuation of the travelling bioscope shows that popularized scenes and songs from the Calcutta theatres in the first decade of the century; here too J.J. Madan's enterprise played a major role.”<sup>168</sup>

In 1932 Madan Theatres also attempted the first Indian colour film, *Bilwamangal*, sending the film abroad for processing.<sup>169</sup> All of these ambitious ventures must have proved to be a huge financial strain on an already beleaguered company and, despite the success of their talkies through 1931 and 1932, Madan Theatres' production dropped sharply. According to Modhu Bose, production had virtually stopped by 1933:

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<sup>165</sup> The Gramophone and Typewriter Ltd., London opened its first Indian office in Calcutta in 1901. The company was trading in India from early 1900 through an agency, The Mutoscope and Biograph Co. of India Ltd. This gives a sense of the close relationship that various media enjoyed at the turn of the century. For a detailed discussion of the early music industry in India and the Gramophone Company (later HMV) see Kinnear, *The Gramophone Company's First Indian Recordings*.

<sup>166</sup> The other radio station was in Bombay.

<sup>167</sup> Kinnear, *The Gramophone Company's First Indian Recordings*, 11-12.

<sup>168</sup> Hansen, “The *Indar Sabha* Phenomenon,” 105.

<sup>169</sup> Rangoonwalla, *A Pictorial History*, 15. The film was likely to have been a sound remake of their first Bengali film of the same name produced in 1919.

“Madan Company is in a very bad condition. They are not producing any films – the production department is more or less closed.”<sup>170</sup>

Madan Theatres rapidly sold off their cinema theatres across South Asia and closed down their cinema business by the mid-1930s. The reasons for their sudden decline are multifarious. Heavy borrowings from investors to fund their ambitious productions along with the high costs of conversion to sound meant they had reached a critical stage. J. J. Madan, in an interview to Krishnaswamy, discusses a failed deal with Hollywood’s Universal Pictures that was being negotiated in the late 1920s, thus suggesting that the end had already begun.<sup>171</sup> However, the stock market crash in 1929 ended any remaining hopes of that deal coming through.<sup>172</sup> The big expenditures on sound between 1928 and 1932 must have been a last-ditch effort by the Madan brothers at reversing losses. Barnouw and Krishnaswamy offers another rationale for their sudden collapse in the early 1930s: that by then their vast South Asian cinema empire had become unwieldy and “profits were being siphoned away”.<sup>173</sup> In addition, I would suggest that the Madans’ monopoly had dissipated with the maturing of the market, and with several other exhibitors and distributors entering the fray, providing increased competition. It may also have been that their films were not able to keep up with changing audience tastes and, after the initial euphoria over the spectacular sound films had died down, there was little novelty the Madan films could offer audiences well-schooled in the ‘cinema habit’, in a more competitive production environment. After all, by this time, experienced filmmakers, screenwriters and performers from Madan Theatres had moved on to other production studios in Calcutta, or to the more lucrative Bombay. And the likes of New Theatres had started to provide a stiff challenge within Calcutta.

The Madan studio and its production unit were bought over by Sukhlal Karnani in the mid-1930s to form Indrapuri studios. The creative and technical people that

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<sup>170</sup> Bose, *Amar Jiban*, 181.

<sup>171</sup> Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, 65.

<sup>172</sup> Bose, *Amar Jiban*, 181.

<sup>173</sup> Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, 66. These accounts are also based on interviews with J. J. Madan. This, along with J J Madan’s testimony to the ICC, remains the only direct sources of evidence from the Madan management. Apart from these sources, memoirs of actors and directors who worked with the Madans help us to reconstruct the history of Madan Theatres.

were still on the Madan rolls joined other studios. Jyotish Bannerjee, one of Calcutta's earliest directors, moved to Radha Films. Priyanath Ganguly, another regular director at Madan, directed a hit film for East India Film Company, *Jamuna Puline* (released January, 1933) and then went on to launch his own film company, Kali Films. Charles Creed, the cinematographer and editor who worked with Ahindra Choudhury in the early 1920s, and then stayed with the Madans right through till the end, migrated to Bharatlakshmi Studio. And the largest film business in the history of South Asian cinema more or less disappeared to be relegated to obscurity in the annals of history.<sup>174</sup>

### 2.5.2 THE NEW STUDIOS OF THE SOUND ERA

Radha Films, started by a wealthy businessman Rai Bahadur Radha Kishen Chamaria, around 1932, absorbed several former Madan employees. Chamaria was a significant personality in the story of Calcutta cinema, and one who I return to in Chapter 5. Another noteworthy studio that had several former Madan employees, including the highly experienced Charles Creed, was Bharatlakshmi Studio. Its proprietor, Ghanshyam Das Chokhani, had earlier formed the silent studio Indian Kinema Arts (discussed above) which released its last silent film in 1932. It is very likely that Chokhani disbanded the old silent company and entered the new era of the talkies with an entirely new name in 1933.

It is a reasonable assumption that the proprietors of these new companies, especially Chamaria and Chokhani, were financiers from whom Madan Theatres had loaned money and once the Madans started to sell off their film empire these financiers bought over various parts of the business. It may well be that Chokhani, despite having an independent existence through his silent studio, was also one of the Madan financiers and, after the collapse, Chokhani took over the old Madan studio and renamed it Indrapuri studio.<sup>175</sup> Further, Chamaria started Radha Films

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<sup>174</sup> Film historians today recognise that it is an inordinate task to construct a detailed narrative of the Madans. The rapid dissolution of the studio means that there is limited record of its decline in the contemporary literature. And since Madan Theatres is not given adequate space in histories of Bombay cinema or of Bengali cinema there is little direct evidence that has come down to us, apart from the interview of J. J. Madan conducted by S. Krishnaswamy in *Indian Film*.

<sup>175</sup> Indrapuri studio is still with the Chokhanis today.

right around the time that Madan Theatres was disintegrating, further reinforcing this deduction.

Another studio that held considerable sway through the 1930s is **East India Film Company** founded by R. L. Khemka, an automobile parts dealer, in 1932.<sup>176</sup> Its first Bengali film, *Jamuna Puliney*, was released in January 1933. In its heyday East India Film Company “had a payroll of 300 artists, technicians, and others, and an output averaging eight films a year.”<sup>177</sup> The company produced several films in Bengali, Hindi and Urdu in the 1930s, including the Modhu Bose directed *Salima* (1935), a film that, Bose claims, became a big hit in the Punjab.<sup>178</sup>

Apart from the big six mentioned above, a number of smaller companies also flourished in this decade. Between 1931 and 1939 several small companies appear in the filmography, including the likes of Kali Films and Pioneer Films, suggesting that the industry had stabilised in this period, with multiple big studios existing alongside independent production houses.

Along with more capital flowing into the industry, another reason for this emergence of a stable, competitive industry in the 1930s was the removal of monopoly thanks to the rapid disbanding of the Madan empire. Indeed, I would argue that the studio era in Calcutta was possible because of the decline of the Madans. On the one hand monopolistic control of the industry was removed leaving the market free for other players to compete, a point that is taken up for further discussion in the following chapter. Secondly, the breaking up of the company left several experienced technical and creative personnel without work as a result of which these personnel joined the emerging new talkie studios or grouped together to form new companies. Former employees bought over parts of the cinema business: thus, along with Kali Films, Madan director Priyanath Ganguly took over management of two key Madan cinemas located in north Calcutta. The Madans had borrowed heavily to fund their ventures, and with the dissolution of the Madan Company it is very likely that the funders repossessed,

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<sup>176</sup> Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, 113.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Bose, *Amar Jiban*, 200.

or bought over, various parts of the Madan assets, including the equipment, studio and films to form their own companies.

### 2.5.3 NEW THEATRES: The ‘Radiant Jewel’ of Bengali Cinema<sup>179</sup>

The studio that was the most famous of them all was New Theatres Ltd, popularly known as NT. While the fortunes of the much-maligned Madan Company waned, that of NT rose steadily through the early 1930s. NT was rapidly embraced by the Bengali elite as an icon of Bengali cultural enterprise and the NT logo was instantly recognisable, not just in Bengal, but all across South Asia.<sup>180</sup>

New Theatres was formed in 1931<sup>181</sup> by B. N. Sircar, the young son of the Advocate General of Bengal, and with his connections Sircar had little problems raising money.<sup>182</sup> Earlier in 1930, Sircar had started a silent film company, **International Film Kraft**, which produced two silent films: *Chorkanta* (released 3/4/31), directed by Charu Roy, and *Chashar Meye* (released 4/9/31), directed by Prafulla Roy. Both films were shot by Nitin Bose, and their production controllers were Prafulla Roy and Amar Mallik respectively.

All four names were experienced hands in the film industry by then. Charu Roy had started as an artist and set designer, and by 1931 had directed several films. Prafulla Roy had assisted Himansu Rai and Franz Osten, from Berlin’s Emelka Studios, on *Light of Asia* (1925) and *Shiraz* (1928), and had also directed several films in Calcutta. Additionally both Charu Roy and Prafulla Roy had acted in the Himansu Rai/ Franz Osten films. A scan of the Bengali filmography suggests that Nitin Bose was an experienced cameraman by then and Amar Mallik too had

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<sup>179</sup> Mukherjee, *Bangla Chalachchitrer Itihas*, 357.

<sup>180</sup> Also see Madhuja Mukherjee, “Stories in Light and Shadow: Comment on New Theatres and Its Popular Films”, Pune: National Film Archives of India, 2000; Sharmistha Gooptu, “The Glory that Was: An Exploration of the Iconicity of New Theatres” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 23, no. 1 and 2 (2003): 286-300.

<sup>181</sup> Date according to the EIC; Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, gives the date as 1930. This date cannot be correct given that International Film Kraft continued to release films under the name until September 1931.

<sup>182</sup> Sircar was barely 20 when he formed New Theatres. Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, 74.

several films to his credit. It is quite evident that from the very beginning Sircar had taken on board very talented, and experienced, young cinema professionals.

New Theatres was created in 1931 by merging International Film Kraft with the members of Barua Film Unit; and several other writers, directors and technical talent joined the NT banner:

“Unlike most film leaders, he [Sircar] seemed to have no consuming ambition to be performer or director. Putting the right pieces together was his specialty.... B. N. Sircar was the first example in Indian film of the creative ‘executive producer’.

“...In choice of personnel he most clearly showed the quality of his leadership.”<sup>183</sup>

There were several reasons why so many talented technicians, directors and actors joined NT in the first few years, when the company had not yet proved itself. B. N. Sircar may have been a dynamic leader and his company certainly had the money. But equally, if not more significantly, by 1931 the film industry in Calcutta was disintegrating. By the late 1920s the industry had reached maturity and, as mentioned above, there was a sharp rise in film production houses from 1929 onwards. With the coming of sound, however, many of these companies were put out of business, among them several key silent film companies. All these experienced film professionals were looking for work and Sircar’s NT seemed to be the perfect destination, given Sircar’s social background and his financial and technical resources. The alternatives for employment in 1931 and 1932 were Madan Theatres, which many of these personnel had rejected during the silent period; Aurora Film Corp., which had been around for a long time but was not known for the quality of its productions; and the newly formed East India Films, which was owned by a ‘non-Bengali’, and therefore not the desired alternative.

Sircar, on the other hand, had built a high quality studio, with Tanar sound equipment<sup>184</sup> and what was, according to prevailing standards, a state-of-the-art

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> EIC

laboratory, with the help of a Hollywood sound technician. And he had the experienced Nitin Bose as the technical director of his company:

“Calcutta provided a complete surprise... contrasting the rushing haphazard methods of Bombay. Here I was presented with the nucleus of what has become a **real** production unit. Formed by several of Calcutta’s leading citizens, who had wisely surrounded themselves with competent assistants well financed and with an ambitious programme of producing pictures for India actually comparable to those of the independent Hollywood companies, this company is building on a firm foundation.”<sup>185</sup> [Emphasis Mine]

There was a strong emphasis on technical excellence within the ethos of the company and a number of technological innovations were brought in by technicians and directors associated with NT. Nitin Bose, NT’s chief cinematographer and technical director, introduced a number of technological innovations and his brother, sound recordist Mukul Bose, introduced the practice of playback singing to film<sup>186</sup> – a practice that went on to become an inseparable part of the mainstream cinemas of India. Director Debaki Bose made innovative use of music in NT’s first hit film, *Chandidas* (1932). All of these incidences, along with the films, aided in the construction of NT in the popular imaginary, as well as in film history, as a quality studio that was a cut above the rest:

“Indian films can never be like Western films. There is no comparison between the two. But all educated and intellectual high-society spectators who are of this opinion are now tongue-tied because of an excellent film, *Devdas*, by New Theatres Ltd. Already other New Theatres films like *Chandidas*, *Puran Bhakt* etc. have proved that New Theatres’ films are a combination of excellent technique, interesting story, clear photography and effective background music.

“...*Chandidas*, which has a very simple story by itself has a magnificent romance in it. Similarly *Devdas* is also a simple love story but because of its sad end it touched everyone’s heart. The story of two lives being separated just because of social restrictions has been shown very effectively. There are no huge sets, no fight scenes, no mythological story, no theatrical dialogues and not much vulgarity but on the contrary we see a situation presented skilfully, very simply, with easy dialogue and a homely atmosphere. A very-close-to-life story makes *Devdas* an excellent film. So we recommend that

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<sup>185</sup> Deming, “Talking Picture in India,” *The Cinema*, June 1932.

<sup>186</sup> EIC, 166.

our audience see this film at least once – and say to Maharashtra filmmakers ‘**See how Bengal lead: Therefore, create something new like this** and make an effort to keep the flag of Maharashtra Art flying high.’<sup>187</sup> [Emphasis Mine]

NT’s first film, a talkie, was a literary adaptation of famous Bengali novelist Saratchandra Chatterjee’s *Dena Paona* (released 24/12/1931).<sup>188</sup> The film was shot by Nitin Bose and directed by well-known literateur and filmmaker, Premankur Atorthy. Interestingly, NT’s second and third releases were two Urdu films, *Mohabbat Ke Aansu* (Tears of Love, 1932) and *Zinda Laash* (The Living Corpse, 1932). In fact, in 1932, NT had four Bengali and four Urdu releases.<sup>189</sup> This suggests that the studio was not just content with the Bengali market but had ambitious plans targeting the pan-Indian market right from the very beginning.

In later years, NT reached iconic status for the superior quality of its films, and has been celebrated in all accounts of Indian cinema as a major studio of the 1930s and 1940s, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter. NT was primarily known for its literary adaptations of Bengali novels like *Devdas* (1935) and for its socials like *Mukti* (Freedom, 1937), *Didi* (Sister, 1937), *Street Singer* (1938) etc.<sup>190</sup> All of these films were shot in Bengali and Hindi/Urdu, and in some cases Tamil and Telegu as well; in fact, multilingual productions were a regular facet of NT’s oeuvre. Official histories have scarce mention of the more popular Hindi/Urdu productions from NT, which appear to have been given a fair degree of importance at the time by strategists within the studio.

A closer look at NT’s filmography reveals that, apart from literary adaptations and socials, NT also produced several films in various other genres. These included comedies, primarily made by D. G., who too had joined NT and went on to produce several comedies under its banner. Devotionals were a major genre in the

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<sup>187</sup> Editorial, *Kiran* (Marathi Weekly) Nov 16, 1935, reprinted in Rani Burra, ed., *Looking Back*, 96.

<sup>188</sup> Date as cited in Pinaki Chakraborty, *Chalachitrer Itihase New Theatres* (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 2006). This is the authorised history of New Theatres. The Nandan Directory gives the release date as 30/12/1931.

<sup>189</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2, Calcutta had a large number of Hindi and Urdu speaking populations who had migrated from neighbouring states. This will be further delved into in the following chapter when discussing circulation territories.

<sup>190</sup> I use the Hindi/Urdu names for the films as these were more widely known.

thirties: the devotional *Chandidas* (1932/1934)<sup>191</sup> was NT's first 'super' film finding success in Bengal, while the 1934 Hindi version was a superhit across India. However interestingly, what is less well known is that NT made several films that can be best categorised as romance and these included a large smattering of popular elements which pan-Indian audiences would associate with mainstream Hindi cinema in later years.

For instance, the synopsis in the printed booklet<sup>192</sup> of *Daku Monsoor* (Bandit Monsoor, Urdu, 1935), released in the same year as the celebrated *Devdas*, is written in a very colloquial language, suggesting that the booklet, and therefore the film, was aimed at a less educated audience:

“Hurrah! Hurrah! Glorious is Nazim Shahib. Shouts of joy – the joy of peace, the safety of life and the security of property at last. What a relief! Nazim Shahib, the mighty and powerful ruler of good many villages has captured the terrible giant, the disturber of the neighbourhood Monsoor – the dacoit...”

The booklet includes a description of a somewhat risqué bathing scene, an essential element of mainstream cinema in India from the earliest days - Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra* also included a bathing scene. If this booklet is anything to go by, the film could not have been targetted at the family, or elite audiences, but at a wider mass audience:

“Monsoor ran and ran towards the village, found Paribanu bathing in an old tank he silently dived into the water from behind a bush and pulled her through...”

This is certainly not the *bhadralok* cinema that Calcutta, and NT especially, has been celebrated for in the received film history. That this was not a one-off attempt also becomes clear from scanning contemporary trade journals. An entry

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<sup>191</sup> Also see Madhuja Mukherjee, for a comparative analysis of the Bengali and Hindi versions of the film. Mukherjee, “Stories in Light and Shadow: Comment on New Theatres and Its Popular Films”, (Pune: National Film Archives of India, 2000).

<sup>192</sup> Printed booklets for individual films were a common practice. These booklets consisted of the synopsis of the story, songs and publicity stills of the film. Often, they were printed in multiple languages.

in the leading Bengali journal, *Filmiland*, in June 1932, states that NT's Urdu film, *Mohabbat Ke Aansu*, was not doing well and the film

“... could not secure sufficient booking [it] has been rechristened *Josh e Mohabbat* after an addition of **several thrilling scenes**. It is now running at the New Pearl Talkies.”<sup>193</sup> [Emphasis Mine]

This instance reveals that B. N. Sircar was not oblivious to the demands of the market and goes against the grain of Sircar's, and NT's, carefully cultivated image of the genteel film studio that catered to a cultured cinema audience – an image that fed into contemporaneous nationalist and reformist discourse. Yet, this nuanced image of NT should not come as a surprise: after all the so-called elite Bengali Public Theatre, which was the bastion of the *bhadralok* cultural endeavour in the late nineteenth century, had also seen the infusion of popular tropes, as discussed in Chapter 1.

The evidence from the film booklets and journals suggests that, in stark contrast to official narratives, NT appears to have had a two-pronged strategy for production right from the start: it spread its risks by producing different genres of films targeted at different audiences, and simultaneously, multiplied its audience base by producing films for different linguistic constituencies.

NT perfected the art of the multilingual film, targeted at different linguistic communities, before dubbing and subtitling had become common practice in India.<sup>194</sup> When *Chandidas* (1932) proved to be a runaway hit in Bengali NT remade it in Hindi two years later. The disintegration of the pan-Indian market due to the coming of sound had been addressed through the simple practice of the remake into multiple language versions which made use of the same sets, technical crew and often several of the actors starred in both language versions. This was surely an extension of a long-standing theatrical tradition of adaptation - taken on by the cinema. By 1933, NT had graduated to the simultaneous remake. Debaki Bose shot the Bengali and Hindi versions of *Mirabai* simultaneously. The Bengali version, *Mirabai*, was released on September 11, 1933, at Chitra, an elite

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<sup>193</sup> *Filmiland*, vol. III, no. 113, June 11, 1932.

<sup>194</sup> Dubbing and subtitling have been used in Hollywood since 1929, though not common in India at the time.

cinema theatre owned by NT in Calcutta. The Hindi version of the film, *Rajrani Mira*, was delayed by two months and released on November 11, 1933, at New Cinema, another NT-owned cinema theatre. NT's filmography reveals that the simultaneous remake in Bengali and Hindi/Urdu was a practice commonly used throughout its existence.<sup>195</sup>

This attempt at widening the market from one of India's most celebrated and successful studios suggests an acute awareness within the industry of the existence of heterogeneous audiences. It also suggests an imagination of the region, and other distinct territories beyond the region, within the industry itself, and not simply a homogenised national - which is the paradigm within which film scholars and historians have tended to discuss 'Indian cinema'. It is no accident that NT became known amongst cinema audiences across South Asia and, in particular, amongst the pan-Indian elite. This deliberate circulation of NT films to trans-regional audiences in the early sound era, rather than being confined to regional audiences, does not support its positioning within a regional cinema industry.

It is also significant that NT, known for its socially relevant and elitist cinema, acknowledged the fragmented nature of audiences in Bengal and across South Asia, and tried to reach out to these audiences with different genres of films. In the sound era it was the only studio from Calcutta, apart from the Madans, that managed to do this successfully and consistently.

## **2.6 CALCUTTA TALKIES: In Search of a New Framework**

This close study of the NT filmography suggests that there was much more going on in Calcutta cinema than that acknowledged by official film history. Although until this point I have focussed on production histories, without extensive reference to the film subject matter, a study of genres of Bengali talkies in the early sound era adds to this new understanding of Bengal's most renowned studio

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<sup>195</sup> Also see Nitin Bose in *Cinema Vision*, vol.1 no. 2, (1980): 40. Arun Khopkar discusses the multiple language films in *Cinema Vision*, vol.1 no. 2, (1980): 53-54. Khopkar calls it the Second Language Take.

engaged in both elitist and popular productions. Unfortunately, this part of my study had to be limited to the Bengali films produced in Calcutta, as a complete filmography of Calcutta productions, in other Indian languages, is not available. The only exception to this is filmographies of NT. A recent authorised history of NT, written by a current employee, lists all NT films produced, irrespective of language.<sup>196</sup>

Expectedly, the study of the Bengali filmography between 1931 and 1935 throws up genres that include devotionals as well as socials, mythologicals, historicals and literary adaptations. However, many of the films can be termed popular with multiple generic elements, and the stories seem to be akin to the *masala* films that characterised much of Bombay cinema in later decades. A few action films are to be found as well, along with comedies and romances.

This analysis of the genres produced in the first five years of the Bengali talkie leads to an astonishing conclusion. While there were several socials and devotionals produced in these years they were by no means the primary genres. Mythologicals were in abundance, especially in 1933 and 1934, mirroring the large number of mythologicals made in the early silent era, most of which were made by the Madans. Moreover, an analysis of the reviews of these films indicates that popular generic elements are to be found even in the so-called high filmic genres, and these elements were mobilised by the majority of Calcutta producers, including NT.

In the first few years of the talkies, the industry was experimenting with a range of genres, as evinced by the different genres that seem to dominate in successive years. In 1932, the first year that saw the production of a significant number of Bengali talkies, studios privileged literary adaptations (nine films were produced that year). The trend changed over the next couple of years with mythologicals predominating over any other genre. Significantly, these are the years following the release of *Chandidas* (1932, Bengali). However, the following year, 1935, marks a complete generic shift. Half of the eighteen Bengali talkies produced in

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<sup>196</sup> Chakraborty, *Chalachitrer Itihase New Theatres*.

1935 were socials, with only one literary adaptation – *Devdas* (Bengali), which could also be termed a social.

In contrast, literary adaptations and socials dominated Bengali film releases in 1936, possibly brought on by the success of *Devdas*: of the nineteen films released that year seven each were either a literary adaptation or a social. Of course, a large number of the literary adaptations can also be classified as socials. This suggests that the move towards socials only occurs by the mid-1930s. Perhaps this preponderance of socials in Calcutta productions by mid-decade – at a time when circulation of these films also picked up, as we will see in subsequent chapters - has led to the characterisation of Bengali cinema as of superior quality when compared to Bombay cinema.

The other side of the story, overlooked by film histories, is that a significant number of films that echoed the so-called low genres of Hollywood cinema continued to be produced within the Bengali film industry, not just by Madan Theatres but by all of the other studios through the so-called “glorious” decade of the 1930s. Despite the emphasis on quality cinema that appeared in contemporary film journals,<sup>197</sup> Calcutta studios continued to produce films that can only be classified as populist. This is discounting the fact that popular or more low-brow generic elements like adventure and romance could also have seeped into more elite genres like socials and literary adaptations. As pointed out above, the Bengali Public Theatre that was much touted by the *bhadralok* had a generous sprinkling of folk and popular elements. By extension, it is more than likely that Bengali cinema, which already commanded a much wider audience than the Public Theatre by the 1930s, also included low-genre elements even in the so-called *bhadralok* (elite) cinema. The discussion of NT’s *Daku Monsoor* above is a case in point. This is also apparent from the discussion in the journals, where several writers critique Bengali talkies in the 1930s for not matching the criteria

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<sup>197</sup> These articles stressed the need for writing characters with psychological depth and realistic storylines with an educational/ reformist value.

for ‘good’ cinema that was the need of the hour, according to these commentators, to educate and shape an emergent nation.<sup>198</sup>

This study of the empirical evidence thus contradicts established perceptions of the Calcutta films as elitist in available histories and helps to explain the disappointment and the lament that is found over and over again in contemporary journals. Another significant marker of the early talkies is that several cultural icons, especially poets and writers, were closely involved in film production, and the discourse in the journals celebrated these associations, as well as the films, despite the fact that the films did not necessarily do well at the box office.<sup>199</sup> The studio news sections of these journals are filled with reports on these associations and we find a great deal of hype leading up to the release of these films, including stills of lead actors/actresses, followed by reviews in the journals. What comes through in these articles and reviews is an inability to distinguish between literary and performance forms, which leads to several commentators privileging the realist narrative film form. There is an emphasis on realistic storylines, characters with psychological depth and a privileging of dialogues over and above the visual or other aural elements (like ambient sound and background music), especially on films based on literary texts. And now that characters could speak the burden of realistic representation fell on the dialogues, much as the Bengali novels and the Public Theatre had done from the late nineteenth century. Here, it is worth noting that the colloquial Bengali term for film – *boi* – is the same as the word used for book – a usage that underlines the perception of film as narrative in Bengal.

It is fairly apparent that the commentators writing in journals like *Film India*, *Nachghar*, *Dipali*, *Varieties Weekly* etc. were not interested in exploring a popular cinema but a film form that they believed the masses should be seeing. This cinema, in their eyes, would educate and uplift the masses, carrying on the modernist project of the literature and the theatre. As Dass argues, this cinema would also serve to contain the masses.<sup>200</sup> To a large extent the New Theatres

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<sup>198</sup> A more detailed enquiry into this is beyond the scope of this thesis and will require extensive research.

<sup>199</sup> As an example, NT’s first film *Dena Paona* (1931), was based on well known a Saratchandra novel but was a flop.

<sup>200</sup> Dass, “Outside the Lettered City.”

films succeeded in meeting these norms and gained following amongst the elite not just in Bengal but across India. However, film is an expensive medium and requires mass patronage for its sustenance and, as the detailed analysis of genres here shows, a larger section of the industry in the 1930s, including NT, was keen to cater to more popular tastes in the interests of survival.

An added fallout of this perception of film as realist narrative has led to the disregard for other film forms, not only within the industry, but crucially by film history. Thus, NT is celebrated while Aurora is largely ignored, and Madan scorned, by film history.

It is worth emphasising again that the Calcutta film industry was much more than the Bengali film industry. As is apparent from the discussions above, the Calcutta studios, including NT, produced a large number of Hindi/Urdu films each year, as well as films in several other languages. Another crucial factor that has been largely overlooked by the received history is the close relationship between the industries in Madras and Calcutta, necessitated by the entry of sound.

## **2.7 MADRAS IN CALCUTTA**

When sound came to India in the early 1930s, Madras production companies did not have any sound producing facilities. Instead of directly investing in the expensive new technology they rented studios in Calcutta and Bombay to produce films in Tamil and Telegu. Amongst the Calcutta companies Madan Theatres, East India Film Company and Aurora rented out their sound studios to Madras producers. But these Calcutta studios went one step further and started regular production of films in Tamil and Telegu, and in this they were joined by the other three major sound studios, namely NT, Radha and Bharatlakshmi.

While the contribution of the Calcutta companies to the southern Indian film industry is not readily available, it is now possible to start to piece together Aurora's role. The study of extant censor certificates in the offices of Aurora suggests that it produced several talkie films in Tamil and Telegu in the 1930s. Among the films produced are *Sakku Bai* (Tamil, censor certificate 27/3/1934),

*Sati Anasuya* (Telegu, censor certificate 23/9/1935), directed by Ahindra Choudhury, *Vipranarayana* (Telegu, censor certificate 25/10/1937), directed by Ahindra Choudhury, *Amma* or *Annapurna* (Telegu, censor certificate 17/2/1939) and *Sri Sankaracharya* (Tamil, censor certificate 14/12/1939).<sup>201</sup> This list is significant as during this entire period Aurora produced just one short sound film in Bengali and no feature length film in Bengali. Clearly, Aurora's production strategy was not leaning towards the production of Bengali films at this stage – a point that will be taken up for detailed discussion in Chapter 4.

Amongst the other Calcutta studios, Madan Theatres had throughout maintained a pan-South Asian perspective in their film activities right from the very beginning, so it comes as no surprise that they were involved in southern language productions. New Theatres' record of multilingual productions can be found in its filmography, and they produced a number of films in Tamil and Telegu. According to Barnouw and Krishnaswamy several other Calcutta companies of the sound era were also producing films in multiple languages. For instance, Radha Films produced films in Bengali, Oriya, Tamil and Telegu; while even a relatively small production house like Kali Films produced films in Bengali, Oriya and Telegu. But the Calcutta studio that was involved in large-scale production in Tamil and Telegu films was East India Film Company.<sup>202</sup> The studio brought over groups of Tamil and Telegu speaking actors from South India for their own productions and also hired out its studio to production companies from Madras for Tamil and Telegu productions. This movement of cast and crew continued for a few years in the 1930s, until sound studios were built in Madras. Several technicians and creative people from the East India Film Company migrated to Madras at this time.<sup>203</sup>

The intriguing factor that emerges from this detailed exposition is the involvement of **all** the major Calcutta studios in the production of Tamil and Telegu films for southern Indian audiences. This large-scale involvement of Calcutta studios in

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<sup>201</sup> These are the censor certificates I have found in the records of the Aurora Film Corporation. Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, suggest they also made Assamese films in the 1930s, but I have not found any record of these films in the Aurora files. Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, 112-3.

<sup>202</sup> Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, 113.

<sup>203</sup> Bose, *Amar Jiban*, 197.

producing talkies for Madras has not been discussed in any great detail in standard histories.<sup>204</sup> And this is despite the fact that the ownership of these Calcutta studios was not primarily Tamil and Telegu speaking. The link with Madras may have been fortuitous – Madras producers came to Calcutta as they needed sound studios and Calcutta had the requisite production facilities to offer. However, Calcutta studios made a purposeful entry into producing Tamil and Telegu films for the Southern territories, sometimes even privileging these over and above films in the local Bengali language, or in Hindi/Urdu for the more lucrative northern market, as in the case of Aurora and East India Films.<sup>205</sup> Clearly, this trans-regional production practice was an opportunity for these studios to move beyond their immediate market in an effort to consolidate their business, at a time when film in India was increasingly differentiated along linguistic lines.

The arrival of sound in India has been seen by standard histories of ‘Indian cinema’ as the moment that fragmented a previously homogeneous pan-Indian audience. The large size of the Hindi speaking population has been suggested as a significant factor that helped Bombay cinema to become the dominant industry in South Asia. Barnouw and Krishnaswamy use this moment as the turning point for the Bombay industry, which made films in Hindi/Urdu.<sup>206</sup> They point out that, at the beginning of the 1930s when sound production started in India, the Hindi-speaking population totalled 140 million, by far the largest linguistic group, followed by 53 million Bengali-speaking people, 21 million Marathi-speaking people and 20 million Tamil speakers.<sup>207</sup> The rapid growth and stabilisation of the Calcutta film industry in the 1930s could partially be attributed to the potential strength of this Bengali speaking audience, which made it the second largest cinema audience in South Asia, in terms of language.

However, this enquiry into production history in Calcutta complicates simple linguistic divisions of the audience for film in India. As this chapter has

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<sup>204</sup> Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, does refer to some of the films made for Madras by the Calcutta studios, 112-113.

<sup>205</sup> By 1933 the Punjab had overtaken Bombay as the most lucrative market for films. Editorial in *The Cinema Annual*, 1933.

<sup>206</sup> Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, 59-60.

<sup>207</sup> These figures are based on Suniti Kumar Chatterji, *Languages and the Linguistic Problem*, Oxford Pamphlets on Indian Affairs, No 11. Madras, Oxford University Press, 1945, 14, cited in Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, 59.

demonstrated, the reality was far more complex and the cosmopolitan Calcutta industry was not only producing films in the Bengali language for this putative audience of 53 million. As we will also see in Chapter 4, practices had already developed to cater to linguistically divided audiences of the silent screen, before sound film production started in India. Further, this assumption of a homogeneous Indian audience, before the talkies, does not hold because the audience for the cinema was always fragmented – class being a key factor, as discussed above and through this thesis.

The regular production of multilingual films by Calcutta studios, catering to audiences in other so-called ‘regional’ markets, that were removed both linguistically and geographically, defies the prevailing tendency in film studies towards a simple linguistic and regional categorisation of cinema in India. For an industry that has been classified as ‘regional’ this foray beyond the region, into production in multiple languages for multiple territories across South Asia, requires further enquiry. The answers are not in the official histories, nor do they come from a study of production practices, or the analysis of film texts; instead they derive out of a study of circulation histories.

## CHAPTER 3

### CINEMA IN THE CITY

*“...After dinner drove to the Grand. Played snookers and won. Afterwards to the Biograph, to which we were invited for nothing....”<sup>1</sup>*

The Grand, referred to by this soldier, was the Grand Hotel, home of the Theatre Royal and the site of the first Cinematograph screening in Calcutta. This diary entry gives us a flavour of the life of a British soldier in the city, circa 1900. The newly refurbished Grand Hotel was very much a space of leisure, not just for officers camping across the road on the Calcutta Maidan, but also for the European elite living in the city. And three years after its first showing at this very venue, and elsewhere in the city, the cinema had become an intrinsic part of evening entertainment in Calcutta – both in the European town as well as in the native town in north Calcutta, as discussed in the previous chapter.

The inquiry into production histories in Chapter 2 pointed to the presence of multiple audiences which Calcutta studios catered to. As discussed in Chapter 1, late nineteenth and early twentieth century Calcutta was a global metropolis at the intersection of trade routes within the British Empire, and at the heart of colonial India. This allowed the city to rapidly develop a strong urban film culture that drew on its unique cosmopolitan character – a film culture that grew to be markedly different from the rest of the province of Bengal, as I argue below. This chapter further addresses questions around the urban and diverse nature of the city’s audiences through a study into film circulation within Calcutta. It explores circulation of film in the city, tracing the emergence of film exhibition within the bustling metropolis, in both the European and the Indian towns, from the beginning through to

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<sup>1</sup> From the diary of a soldier camping on the Calcutta Maidan, cited in Henry H. S. Pearse, *The History of Lumsden’s Horse* (London; New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1903), 48.

the 1920s. In the process it comes across a range of exhibition practices in use, catering to different audiences. While the first two sections of this chapter largely look into exhibition the final section is primarily concerned with distribution practices, although at times these two features overlap. Thus, overall, this chapter focuses on different aspects of circulation of film within Calcutta, in particular enquiring further into the allegation of monopolistic practices by the Madans. This enquiry into circulation reinforces the Madan Company's domination in Calcutta through the silent and early talkie period.

Much of this discussion on circulation in the 1920s is based primarily on testimonies in the ICC. The ICC, in its enquiry into the state of the industry, left behind a detailed record of the film industry in India, in the form of interviews and written responses, running into over 3000 pages. Referred to as the ICC *Evidences* these five volumes have become an invaluable resource for subsequent researchers to mine. Volume 2 of ICCE focuses on conversations with the industry in Calcutta. The ICCE offers a vivid insight into the workings of the film industry in the late 1920s, even though the responses need to be understood as occurring within the specific context of a colonial regime and its inherent power structures. The respondents can often be observed to be posturing before the Committee to get across their voices in their efforts to lobby for favourable policies. Despite this, however, the ICC Report and the ICCE remains the most readily available source for scholars to understand the internal workings of the industry in the mid-1920s, particularly the distribution and exhibition sectors, which have remained the obscure sides of the film industries of South Asia. Recent studies by Hughes, Bhaumik and Dass have sought to correct this omission and study the period; however, as discussed, these do not focus on industrial practices in Calcutta in much detail.

The focus on circulation gives us an insight into the challenges of an emergent industry, leading to a more complex narrative of the rise of the Calcutta film industry than that available from received film histories. The city becomes an important character in this story, shaping nascent circulation practices, in particular the

distinctive cultural landscapes of the black and white towns that led to the clustering of cinemas in established sites of public entertainment and consequently to the emergence of cinema neighbourhoods that lasted for several decades thereafter.

The first section of this chapter attempts to map out the rise of film exhibition in the city by focussing on the two main entertainment districts of Chowringhee and Beadon Street. Needless to say, individual cinemas cropped up outside of these entertainment districts but then this thesis does not attempt to provide a comprehensive account of all the sites of film exhibition in the city; rather it zeroes in on specific cinema districts to understand the institutional growth of the cinema in Calcutta. The mapping also becomes a means of contemplation on the close links between the growth of the city and the emergence of a film culture within the city, links that made the clustering of cinema theatres possible and encouraged the growth of the ‘cinema habit’. Thus, Chowringhee grew into an important site of urban culture in turn of the century Calcutta, and subsequently into a cinema district by the 1920s. The mapping that follows is reconstructed from memoirs, newspaper advertisements and journal accounts, since I have not come across any available maps of cinemas in the city in the early 1900s. This mapping further draws out the close links between film and theatre in Calcutta from the earliest days – a link that was pointed out in Chapters 1 and 2. The logic of this first section is not necessarily driven by chronology, rather by space and the concept of neighbourhoods, for cinema houses emerged in the city clustered in distinct neighbourhoods.

### **3.1.1 MAPPING CINEMA IN THE CITY: Location, Neighbourhoods and the Rise of Cinemas**

As discussed in Chapter 1, the nineteenth century city of Calcutta could be roughly divided into two main zones: the European town that developed around the central business, administrative and judicial district of Dalhousie Square and expanded southwards; and the Indian town, situated north of Dalhousie Square and inhabited by

several communities of Indians. An intermediate zone of mixed communities separated the European and Indian towns.

Accordingly, two separate entertainment districts emerged in the rapidly urbanising city of Calcutta. The European centre of entertainment developed along Chowringhee Road, south of Dalhousie Square. Chowringhee Road was also the arterial road connecting the core of the city with expanding southern parts of Calcutta. Businesses, government offices, courts, the main European markets and European residential areas were all located in the vicinity of Chowringhee Road, as were army camps and the port of Calcutta. The other public site of entertainment in the city was situated in the heart of the Indian town in north Calcutta, on and around Beadon Street. Beadon Street had transformed into the main entertainment district for Bengalis by the late nineteenth century with the growth of Bengali Public Theatre. As discussed in Chapter 1 the Public Theatre was the main form of organised public entertainment for Bengali middle classes in the city, and by the 1890s respectable Bengalis frequented the area in the evenings. A third entertainment district started to emerge in the Bhowanipore area of South Calcutta, just south of Chowringhee Road, from the 1920s with the spread of the ‘cinema habit’.

## **CHOWRINGHEE**

In the nineteenth century Chowringhee was primarily a residential district inhabited by Europeans.<sup>2</sup> As the city expanded southwards in the mid-1850s, the main road through Chowringhee that connected Dalhousie Square in the north to Circular Road in the south was macadamised, lit with gas lamps and pavements constructed. Chowringhee Road grew to become one of the most important arteries in the city connecting the central business and administrative district of Dalhousie Square to the southern parts of the city where the city was developing. To the west of Chowringhee Road lay the Maidan - a large green expanse that had been developed into an urban

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<sup>2</sup> Chowringhee, a green village until the late eighteenth century, was cleared of forest land to make way for the Maidan and residential properties through the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is designated as a locality, not a road, in old maps of the city.

park through the eighteenth century, and further west, beyond the Maidan, was the river and the port. A row of grand European residential houses lined the eastern side of Chowringhee Road, facing the Maidan and the river, through the first half of the nineteenth century. Several European theatres came up on, or on roads leading off, Chowringhee Road through the nineteenth century, most notably the Theatre Royal, and Opera House. By mid-century hotels and boarding houses cropped up on the eastern side to lodge traders, merchants, sailors and other visitors to the city. The hotels also included “Dining Saloons” and “Billiard Rooms” catering for its clients,<sup>3</sup> as well as for officers of the army camped on the Maidan, and for traders and officials from government offices nearby. Chowringhee Road’s importance grew towards the end of the nineteenth century, due to its centrality and the accessibility of its location. One advertisement of a hotel located on 7, Chowringhee Road sums up the advantages of the location:

“Most conveniently situated within easy distance of all the Government Offices, Fort William, and the business part of Calcutta, and commanding a fine view of the Maidan and the shipping...”<sup>4</sup>

The area started to develop rapidly by the late nineteenth century and several shops and theatres appeared on the eastern side of Chowringhee Road. The real estate developer primarily responsible for this growth was Arratoon Stephen (1861-1927). Mr. Stephen, as he was popularly known, was an Armenian who came to Calcutta in 1880 and had set up his own business by 1884. In 1886 he purchased 19, Chowringhee Road, and opened a jewellery shop there, which, according to his obituary published in *The Statesman* was,

“...the first shop of any consequence that was opened in that important thoroughfare, Dalhousie Square then being the principal business quarter of the city. Many of Mr. Stephen’s friends prophesied ill for his venture on the ground that his shop was too far removed from the busy centre. In a short time,

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<sup>3</sup> Advertisements in *The Statesman*

<sup>4</sup> *The Statesman*, June 1875, reprinted in Ray Choudhury, ed., *Early Calcutta Advertisements*, 508

however, he had built up a business which rivalled that of the best firms in Calcutta.”<sup>5</sup>

Through the 1890s Stephen purchased, or took on long lease, numbers 16, 17 and 18 Chowringhee and developed the properties into shops and what was to become Calcutta’s premiere hotel, the Grand Hotel:

“Mr. Stephen was the first proprietor to erect shops of any pretensions in Chowringhee. When he purchased the sites on this thoroughfare the only shop there was that of Messrs. Sakloth and Company. Chowringhee possessed only small business premises and residential houses. He was also the first to introduce large show windows and iron shutters into Calcutta, for as the show windows permitted a better display of goods the risk of burglary increased.”<sup>6</sup>

Shopfronts and display, it appears, were as critical in Calcutta at this time as they were in the West, and these became visible markers of consumer culture, certainly significant enough to be listed as Stephen’s achievements in his obituary. This evocative image of show windows, that privileges ordered display, together with iron shutters that disrupt the display sums up the coexistence of late Victorian consumerist culture in Calcutta alongside classic colonial anxieties of imminent threat to this modern way of life.

Stephen purchased number 16, Chowringhee, around 1893-94. This property also included the Theatre Royal:

“... It was then a two-storeyed block. Part of it was a hotel, known as ‘Royal’.... The Theatre Royal was then a very insignificant place, and when it passed into Mr. Stephen’s hands it was in a dilapidated condition. It possessed a very small stage, constructed of empty brandy and whisky cases. When he had secured the building, which afterwards became known as Mrs. Monk’s Grand Hotel, Mr. Stephen rebuilt the whole of the frontage, on the ground floor of which are some of the best... shops in Calcutta. During the progress of the building Mrs. Monk negotiated with Mr. Stephen for the lease of the house, and when it was completed he let the hotel portion to her. Work was finished in

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<sup>5</sup> *The Statesman*, May 14, 1927, cited in Ray Choudhury, ed., *Early Calcutta Advertisements*, 580

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

December, 1894, and Mrs. Monk took possession of the hotel on December 5, 1894. Mr. Stephen's next step was to secure in 1895, No. 17, Chowringhee on a long lease. He carried out various improvements, and built a verandah over the footwalk in continuation of the arcade of the Grand Hotel."<sup>7</sup>

The Theatre Royal, as we have seen, is particularly significant in the history of film in Calcutta as the site of the first known Cinematograph exhibition in the city on January 20, 1897. To recap, received film history in Calcutta refers to a Mr. Stephens/Prof. Stevenson who introduced film to Calcutta and trained the legendary Hiralal Sen. This Stephens/Stevenson had reportedly arrived from Britain as an itinerant film exhibitor, with his travelling cinema, the Royal Bioscope, and showed films on various stages in Calcutta.<sup>8</sup> Later, Sen bought the equipment from Stephens/Stevenson (while other versions suggest that Sen directly imported the equipment from England) and continued touring with the Royal Bioscope in Calcutta and across Bengal. More recent research has found traces of a J. J. Stevenson who exhibited in Calcutta's premiere theatre, the Star Theatre, with a Bioscope between October 1898 and May 1899.<sup>9</sup> These Bioscope screenings by Stevenson are dated 21 months after the first Cinematograph screening in Theatre Royal. As discussed in Chapter 2, several other screenings took place between the Theatre Royal screening in January 1897 and the Star Theatre screenings in October 1898, thus confirming that Stephens/Stevenson could not have introduced film to Calcutta. This story is symptomatic of the propensity for myth-making that is apparent in much of received film history, not just in Calcutta, but of early film history in general.

Current literature has solved this problem by collapsing the two figures of Mr. Stephens and Professor Stevenson into one, preferring to retain the name of Professor Stevenson, perhaps because there is evidence of his exhibiting at the Star in 1898. Here, I suggest another possibility for the curious case of the Calcutta Stephens: that the two figures were indeed different personalities and the elusive Mr. Stephens was

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Also see Hughes, "When Film Came to Madras," 162. Hughes suggests that the so-called Prof. Stevenson had actually arrived from Madras, as discussed in Chapter 2.

<sup>9</sup> Chatterjee, *Aar Rekhona Aadhare*, 29-30.

none other than Arratoon Stephen, owner of the Grand Hotel, where the Cinematograph was shown for the first time in Calcutta. Professor Stevenson, on the other hand, was an independent figure, and known to Bengali audiences as the exhibitor at Star Theatre.<sup>10</sup> In the popular imagination of generations of Calcuttans over subsequent decades, the two figures were collapsed into one, effectively rendering Arratoon Stephen invisible in the annals of Bengali cinema, while Stevenson lingers as the figure responsible for introducing the Bioscope to Bengalis, and to Hiralal Sen, and is therefore important to the history of Sen.

Further, while there is no definitive evidence towards this, I would now like to conjecture that the name Royal Bioscope had its origins in Theatre Royal and, after the programme had been exhausted for European customers of the theatre, the equipment and film programme was sent out with the travelling exhibition. The associated travelling show could easily have taken its name from the Theatre Royal, and thus called the Royal Bioscope. Since Stephen was the owner of the property of Theatre Royal his name too was associated with the travelling cinema company. This could explain the reason for the association of Mr. Stephens/Prof. Stevenson with the first film show in Calcutta.

Of course, Arratoon Stephen could have been more directly involved than the account above posits. His obituary tells us that he travelled to England and “subsequently toured the world” in 1895 with his family. It is quite possible that he had been exposed to the Lumière shows on his world travels. He could also have arranged for the import of the cinematograph for the January 20 screening at the Theatre Royal – his theatre - in 1897. Stephen comes across as an astute businessman in these accounts and he also appears to have had a keen interest in visual display. His effort at building the façade of the Grand Arcade on Chowringhee, as well as large show windows for his shops, as suggested in the quote above, is testimony to this interest.

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<sup>10</sup> This is where Hiralal Sen is likely to have encountered the Bioscope for the first time, although Sen may have been acquainted with earlier screenings of Sullivan’s Animatograph in Minerva Theatre in January 1897 or with Reiley’s Cinematograph screenings at Classic Theatre in March and April 1898.

Further, he subsequently went on to build a cinema theatre, the Empire Theatre, in 1908 in partnership with Maurice Bandmann,<sup>11</sup> indicating his continued interest in film exhibition. Thus, the likelihood of Stephens' involvement in the cinema from its very inception in Calcutta is very strong.

However, the Theatre Royal was not the only theatre in the locality showing films: through the first decade several Chowringhee theatres, including the Theatre Royal and the Opera House, held film screenings along with other variety fare.<sup>12</sup> But there were significant developments happening across the road, on the Maidan.

The Calcutta Maidan is, even today, the largest urban park in the city. Originally built as a parade ground for the armed forces, the Maidan was at the heart of European social life in Calcutta, with the European residents walking or driving around the park in the mornings and evenings. Through the nineteenth century it had also grown into a major site of public entertainment in the city. Travelling circuses pitched tents every winter, from at least as far back as the 1870s.<sup>13</sup> The army continued to be stationed on parts of the Maidan, and regiments paraded in the evenings, watched on by admiring onlookers. The Race Course was at the southern end of the Maidan. Several sports clubs also came up at the turn of the century and football and cricket matches were regularly played here, some of these between Europeans and Indians. This was a bustling green open space at the heart of the city that was open to both Europeans and Indians, unlike the entertainment rooms across the road, which were the preserve of Europeans.

By the late nineteenth century the Maidan had grown to be an established venue for public entertainment. While certain parts of the Maidan had been reserved exclusively for Europeans between five and eight o'clock in the mornings and

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<sup>11</sup> See Chapter 2 for more on Bandmann.

<sup>12</sup> Advertisements in *The Statesman*.

<sup>13</sup> Ray Choudhury, ed., *Early Calcutta Advertisements*.

evenings from 1821,<sup>14</sup> it remained a liminal space where boundaries between coloniser and colonised, European and Indian were somewhat relaxed. It was also a space where class divisions were blurred and spectators from all classes mingled to see the wide range of entertainment on display.

In the light of this heritage, unsurprisingly, the Maidan also became the site of India's first permanent cinema. In 1902 J. F. Madan started a regular tent cinema show.<sup>15</sup> Actor Ahindra Choudhury recalls that the tent was on the eastern fringes of the Maidan.<sup>16</sup> This means the Madan tent was easy access from New Market and shops on Chowringhee Road to the east. It was also walking distance from the Fort and the Calcutta port to the west, and from the business and administrative district of Dalhousie to the north. Thus, the tent cinema was ideally located to attract European, Anglo-Indian and Indian audiences, drawn from officers, clerks and workers in the vicinity, soldiers from the Fort and sailors from the port.

Madan's tent cinema became an instant hit amongst Calcuttans of all classes and today we come across reports of crowds queuing outside the Tent Cinema to see films, including Nitin Bose, the celebrated cinematographer and filmmaker from New Theatres, mentioned in Chapter 2.<sup>17</sup> A popular story recounts that a handful of people waited on the muddy grounds of the Maidan in the heavy monsoon rains, to see the bioscope and, so the story goes, Madan instructed his operator to let the few spectators in for free since they were true cinema lovers.<sup>18</sup> This anecdote is another example of Madan's keen business sense: the story, whether true or not, certainly did the rounds with potential audiences and helped to publicise his cinema amongst local Calcutta audiences. Films continued to be regularly shown in the Maidan Tent over the next couple of decades. Madan's Elphinstone Bioscope released their first feature,

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<sup>14</sup> Hans Mattson, *Reminiscences: The Story of an Emigrant* (Saint Paul, Minnesota: D. D. Merrill Company, 1891), 83-85.

<sup>15</sup> J. J. Madan in ICCE vol 2, 835.

<sup>16</sup> Choudhury, *Nijere Haraye Khunji* vol. I, 49-50.

<sup>17</sup> Nitin Bose, *Cinema Vision*, vol.1 no. 2,

<sup>18</sup> Personal conversation with journalist Robin Bandyopadhyay, September 2005.

*Satyawadi Raja Harischandra* (5 reels) in the Tent on the Maidan on March 24, 1917.<sup>19</sup>

J. F. Madan also owned another theatre in the vicinity: the Corinthian Theatre off the northern edge of Chowringhee and just outside the limits of the white town. The Corinthian was located at 5, Dharmatalla Street, below the Madan residence and next to their provision store. It had been an old theatre that had passed into the ownership of J. F. Madan in the 1890s and was a key Parsi stage of the city. The Corinthian had been showing films on 22 June 1901,<sup>20</sup> and had also screened the “first exhibition in Bengal of the Coronation Procession on Bioscope” on 24 September, 1902.<sup>21</sup> From then on the Corinthian frequently screened films and in the 1920s was also the stage for production of the Madan films – both the filmed versions of the stage plays as well as new films like *Nal Damayanti*, as discussed in Chapter 2. Thus, even a cursory enquiry into newspaper advertising reveals that the Madans were involved in motion picture exhibition well before they started operations in the tent-house on the Maidan.

### **BEADON STREET**

Around the same time a vibrant film culture was developing in the Bengali entertainment district in the northern part of the city, in theatres in the Beadon Street area. A typical theatre programme started in the evening and continued into the early hours, and included a long play, along with one or two short plays. These plays ranged over a variety of genres; however short comedies of one or two acts appear most often on these programmes.<sup>22</sup> Long evenings at the theatre suggests a continuation of *jatra* culture, which started with a band playing for an hour or two while spectators arrived from the village and neighbouring villages. It was only after this long musical herald that the *jatra* performance started and continued into the

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<sup>19</sup> Nandan Directory

<sup>20</sup> Advertisement in *The Statesman*, June 1901. See below for a detailed discussion.

<sup>21</sup> Ray Choudhury, ed., *Early Calcutta Advertisements*, p 118.

<sup>22</sup> For a listing of programmes in several Bengali stages see Bhattacharya, *Bangla Rangalayer Itihaser Upakatha*.

early hours. In the theatres of Calcutta's Beadon Street short plays, dances, musical performances and magic shows were a regular feature of the programme, performed before the main play, or in intervals. For instance, the programme at the Emerald Theatre for September 1, 1895 lists "Magic, Skating and Abu Hossain", the last being the main play.<sup>23</sup>

This mix of programming that prevailed in the Bengali Public Theatre at the time easily allowed for the inclusion of cinema as a novel entertainment form – an 'attraction' in the midst of several attractions within a variety entertainment format.<sup>24</sup> From 1897 film started to figure in theatre programmes, especially in the programmes of Classic Theatre, whose proprietor A. N. Dutt was continually looking for innovative means of attracting audiences to his theatre. By the end of 1898, all the key stages in Beadon Street had hosted exhibitions of the moving image, including Minerva, Classic, Emerald, Star and Bengal Theatres. As mentioned in previous chapters, the range of screen technologies prevalent at this time underscore the simultaneous arrival of several travelling exhibitors in Calcutta at the turn of the century and illustrate the amorphous nature of film circulation in this early period.

Film shows continued with equal vigour in these two entertainment districts in the city over the next few years, catering to both European and Indian populations – in the music halls, theatres and sites of variety entertainment. The strong public entertainment culture that prevailed in Beadon Street and Chowringhee meant that film had been firmly entrenched in both the native and European towns by the early 1900s; the difference being that Chowringhee was only open to a select group of Indians, while European visits to the Beadon Street theatres were rare. And theatre managers in turn welcomed film screenings as they proved to be a money-spinner. In addition, travelling exhibitors also held one-off screenings in several other independent locations within the city – basically, they went wherever they were

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<sup>23</sup> Advertisement in *The Statesman*, cited in Bhattacharya, *Bangla Rangalayer Itihaser Upakatha*, 284.

<sup>24</sup> Here I am extending Gunning and Gaudreault's use of the term to apply it not just to film, but to the entire programme that included other forms of entertainment.

invited. A case in point is the Dalhousie Institute,<sup>25</sup> which hosted a screening of an India-Australia Cricket match in January 1900 by the Royal Bioscope.<sup>26</sup> Significantly this is the first advertisement referring to a Royal Bioscope screening that I have come across, though there is no mention of the exhibitor in this advertisement.

### **3.1.2 RISE OF PERMANENT CINEMAS**

In 1907 J. F. Madan inaugurated the Elphinstone Picture Palace, across the road from the Maidan. It was located at 5/1 Chowringhee Place, just off Chowringhee Road and behind the fashionable New Market – the main European market in the city. The Elphinstone was South Asia's first permanent cinema theatre modelled on the picture palaces that were being built all over America, and it was the first of several cinema theatres that came up in the Chowringhee neighbourhood over the next three decades. Its inauguration also marked the beginning of Madan's exhibition chain that stretched across colonial India, Sri Lanka and Burma.

A second theatre opened in 1908 at 4-B, Chowringhee Place, opposite the Elphinstone. This was the Empire Theatre built by Arratoon Stephen, in partnership with Maurice Bandmann.<sup>27</sup> Over the next couple of decades several cinema theatres came up on and around Chowringhee. This growth was mirrored in north Calcutta around the Bengali theatre district. Some of these cinemas were originally built for the theatre and gradually converted into cinemas; others were newly built. (See Appendix 1 for a listing of cinemas in the two districts.)

In an article recalling his earliest cinema experiences historian Atul Sur (1904-?) recalls that the site at 138, Cornwallis Street, (in north Calcutta, just off Beadon

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<sup>25</sup>An exclusive European venue, next to Government House: its large hall hosted concerts, lectures and performances.

<sup>26</sup> Advertisement in *The Statesman*, reprinted in Ray Choudhury, ed., *Early Calcutta Advertisements*.

<sup>27</sup> Obituary in *The Statesman*, March 13, 1922. For details see

<http://www.joydiv.org/familygoingback/career.htm>. I am grateful to Steve Hughes for pointing me to this website. For an image of the Empire Theatre and the booklet see <http://www.joydiv.org/familygoingback/theatres.htm>

Street) was an empty field in his childhood. One winter a circus pitched a tent on the field, he says, and after they left in the summer the Madan Company pitched their tent and started film showings under their banner of Elphinstone Bioscope.<sup>28</sup> This account can be dated to the mid-teens by cross-referencing newspaper advertisements.<sup>29</sup> Sur recalls that the tent house showed films for a long time until it burnt down; it was only after this that the permanent cinema house was constructed and named Cornwallis Theatre.

The Cornwallis was the first permanent cinema theatre in north Calcutta. The cinema was primarily used to show foreign films and, occasionally, stage plays. The first Bengali feature film, *Bilwamangal*, produced by Madan, was released at the Cornwallis Theatre on November 1, 1919. Subsequently, the Cornwallis showed all the Madan Bengali productions until 1926, when Shishir Bhaduri leased the venue for his theatrical productions.<sup>30</sup> The Madans built another cinema next to Cornwallis - the Crown - which was in operation at least from 1925.<sup>31</sup> Henceforth, the majority of the Madan Company's Bengali films were released at the Crown, while the Cornwallis was used to stage theatrical performances and screen foreign films. The first Bengali film released at the Crown was *Dharmapatni*, on May 29, 1926. It was written by well-known Urdu writer Aga Hashr Kashmiri, directed by Jyotish Banerjee and starred famous young stage actor Durgadas Banerjee.<sup>32</sup> Here again we see another example of the star system at play in the production and publicity of the Madan films.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Atul Sur, "Shatabdir Pratidhwani," (1984), reprinted in Sugata Sinha, ed., *Jugopat* 2, no. 2 (2004): 7.

<sup>29</sup> The Elphinstone Bioscope announced its programme from 138 Cornwallis Street in May 1915, Advertisements in *The Statesman*.

<sup>30</sup> Noted theatre personality, Shishir Bhaduri leased the Cornwallis from 1926 and started his new Bengali theatre group, supported by Madan Theatres. This gave a fresh lease of life to Bengali theatre, which had been dwindling through the early 1920s. Not only was this a turning point for Calcutta theatre, it was also pivotal in changing the perception of Madan Theatres which had been trying to gain recognition from the Bengali *bhadralok* for some time.

<sup>31</sup> Advertisements in *The Statesman*, June 1925

<sup>32</sup> Nandan Directory

<sup>33</sup> In the preceding chapter I have argued that the Madans were deliberately invoking the star system in their efforts at bringing in audiences. This was done through the use of famous actors, writers and directors, and these were mobilised in the publicity of the films. This was seen right from their first

There are several reasons why new cinema theatres were clustered in these two locations through the 1910s and 1920s. First, the two neighbourhoods were established hubs of entertainment in the city, and therefore exhibitors could use existing theatres to organise screenings. In addition to infrastructure these centres offered a readily available audience. The clustering benefitted audiences as well, as they were given a choice of cinemas and films to choose from on their evening out.

Secondly, the availability of electricity on and around Chowringhee Road and Beadon Street facilitated the growth of the cinema. Permanent cinemas with daily shows required a steady supply of electricity unlike travelling cinemas, which held occasional shows and could work on mobile generators. While electricity had come to Calcutta in the 1890s it was not until 1899 that it was available for general use. Areas along the main thoroughfares of the city were wired up, including the arterial roads of Chowringhee Road, Dharmatalla Street and Cornwallis Street.<sup>34</sup> Cinemas in central Calcutta were built on or around Chowringhee Road and Dharmatalla Street, while the Bengali theatre district on Beadon Street lay off Cornwallis Street. As seen above, the first cinema theatre in the native town – the Cornwallis - came up on Cornwallis Street.

A third possible reason for the concentration of cinemas was the ease of access to these sites by city audiences. Both Chowringhee and Beadon Street were central locations amongst their respective audience groups. Beadon Street was in the heart of the Bengali residential area while Chowringhee was close to the European residential district. Further, both these areas had transport links to other parts of the city and this helped to get in audiences. Chapters 1 and 2 drew the close links between the theatre and cinema in Calcutta. In the process of establishing an entertainment district theatre

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production, *Satyawadi Raja Harischandra* (1917), which prominently advertised a well-known Parsi stage actor.

<sup>34</sup> "Electric Lighting for Calcutta," *The Statesman*, December 6, 1898, reprinted in *100 Years of The Statesman, 1875-1975*, (Calcutta: The Statesman, 1975), 91

managers also lobbied for, and thereby facilitated, infrastructural growth to draw in audiences. A good example of this is the arrangements made for public transport. Ahindra Choudhury discusses the problems of late night transport to outer parts of the city, especially to the southern parts - where the Bengali middle class was increasingly moving to by this time. Evening shows at the theatre continued until midnight or later. Choudhury mentions that Star Theatre organised special buses to Bhowanipore and Kalighat in south Calcutta for their customers to return home after these late night shows. Bus tickets were sold along with show tickets and Star used the added facility of late night transport as an incentive to lure customers from the expanding southern parts of the city.<sup>35</sup>

### **3.1.3 CINEMAS IN THE LATE TEENS AND TWENTIES**

By the late teens and twenties new permanent cinemas were being built in both these areas, further enhancing their continuance as entertainment districts. Reminiscing about the cinema, Sukumar Sen, linguist, writes that as far as he could recall there were five permanent cinema theatres in the city in 1919-20. These were Picture House, at the crossroad of Chowringhee Road and Lindsay Street; The Globe, off Lindsay Street and across the south entrance of New Market; the Elphinstone Picture Palace just north of New Market; and the Albion Theatre, north of Elphinstone, on Corporation Street. The fifth theatre he refers to was Ripon Theatre in Thanthania, in the Indian part of the city.<sup>36</sup>

Sukumar Sen's memory however does not serve him accurately as he does not bring up the Empire Theatre, which was showing films from 1908. One wonders if this was because Sen did not visit the Empire – perhaps it was out of bounds for middle class Bengalis. The other omissions in Sen's reminiscences are the north Calcutta cinemas, which were already in operation by this time.

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<sup>35</sup> Choudhury, *Nijere Haraye Khunji*, vol.1, 351-2

<sup>36</sup> Sukumar Sen, "Diner Pore Din Je Gelo," (1982), reprinted in Sugata Sinha, ed., *Jugopat* 2, no. 2 (2004): 41.

Four of the five cinemas mentioned by Sen were in the Chowringhee area, in the European part of the city and within walking distance of each other. The Elphinstone had been built by Madan. The Albion had been a nineteenth century stage and was formerly known as the Electric Theatre. This too had been taken over by Madan sometime in the late teens.<sup>37</sup>

The Globe, which was in fact known as the Grand Opera House at this time, had been a nineteenth century theatre patronised by elite Europeans. It had been converted into a full-fledged cinema by 1920. An advert in October 1920 in *The Statesman* refers to the venue as both Grand Opera House and The Bijou Ltd., and the currency of both names with the audience suggests that the name change had been newly effected. The cinema was bought over by Globe Theatres Ltd. in 1922 and changed its name to The Globe.<sup>38</sup>

The fourth cinema mentioned by Sen is The Picture House, which was located at 19, Chowringhee Road, a location that had been occupied by Arratoon Stephen at the beginning of the century.<sup>39</sup> This was an older theatre that staged plays for a European clientele. In October 1920, the manager of The Picture House was Mr. DuCasse,<sup>40</sup> a name that crops up frequently in memoirs and articles. DuCasse is fondly recalled as an exhibitor who was selective in the films that were screened in his cinemas. Ahindra Choudhury, in particular, refers to DuCasse's cinema as his learning ground (see Chapter 2). Interestingly Choudhury refers to DuCasse's small independent cinema as The Bijou.<sup>41</sup> Renaming the Grand Opera House as The Bijou suggests that in 1920 Mr. DuCasse was managing this cinema. However, the location of The Bijou in Choudhury's account does not match up to the location of either the Grand Opera House or the Picture House.

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<sup>37</sup> Advertisement in *The Statesman*, May 1915. In 1915 it was still called the Electric Theatre.

<sup>38</sup> ICCE vol.2, 770. The manager of Globe, N. C. Laharry, gives 1922 as the date of takeover.

<sup>39</sup> This might be additional evidence of Arratoon Stephen's continuation in film exhibition.

<sup>40</sup> Advertisements in *The Statesman*, October 1920.

<sup>41</sup> Choudhury, *Nijere Haraye Khunji*, vol.1, pp. 221-3

This discrepancy allows us to speculate on the trail left by DuCasse and the nature of independent cinema exhibition in Calcutta in the teens. According to Choudhury, the small one-storey independent cinema house run by DuCasse was on Corporation Street, west of the Corporation Building. This description fits the location for the later Madan Palace of Varieties (Elite cinema today). This is a distinct possibility, as we know that Charles Creed went on to join Madan Theatres as an editor around this time. Thus we can speculate: DuCasse sold off his small cinema to the Madans in 1920. With the handsome sum he must have received from the Madans he leased the Grand Opera House, renaming it The Bijou to evoke continuity with his fan club in Calcutta and bring them to the Grand Opera House. In addition DuCasse also leased the Picture House in 1920, as evinced by the advertising. In 1922 DuCasse gave up his lease of the Grand Opera House to Globe Theatres and, according to Choudhury, ran the business at the Picture House for many years.<sup>42</sup>

This unravelling of DuCasse's trail indicates how quickly the exhibition landscape was shifting in the 1910s and 1920s. Older stages were being taken over and converted into cinemas, and an independent exhibitor like DuCasse was moving around quite quickly. At the same time, Madan Theatres was tightening its hold on the industry by taking over existing theatres, as well as building new cinemas.

The threat posed to independent exhibitors was mirrored in other sectors of the industry as well. As discussed in the previous chapter, independent technicians like Charles Creed joined the Madan team and independent producers like Ahindra Choudhury and his partner were forced to approach the Madans for distribution, as they were unable to distribute the film independently.

From the journals it becomes clear that there was an increase in cinema building activity in Calcutta in the late teens and early 1920s, and several of these new

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

cinemas were owned by the Madans. By this time Madan also owned several cinemas in Bombay, both directly, and in partnership with Bandmann,<sup>43</sup> and we can conjecture that Madan was using his war profits not just for feature film production but also in expanding the pan-Indian exhibition business. An advert in *The Statesman* indicates the firm grip that the Madan Company had over film exhibition in Calcutta by the mid-1920s. Issued to advertise screenings of a topical of the funeral of nationalist leader C. R. Das, in June 1925, it lists six cinemas owned by the Madans: Madan Theatre and Palace of Varieties, and the Albion Theatre in the Chowringhee area; the Crown, Cornwallis and Imperial Theatres towards the northern parts of the city; and the Empress Theatre on Russa Road in southern Calcutta. One notable omission from this list is the Elphinstone – but this was possibly because its audience was primarily European, and would not take kindly to the topical with its overtly nationalist content. Thus, the Madans were present in all the entertainment districts of the city – old and new.

By 1927, at the time of the ICC Enquiry, Calcutta had 12 permanent cinemas.<sup>44</sup> The majority of these were directly controlled by Madan Theatres. Even the Empire, which had been owned by the Stephen/Bandmann duo, appears to have been linked with the Madans by the late 1920s.<sup>45</sup> The only two cinema theatres in Chowringhee that appear to have been outside the Madans' jurisdiction were the Globe and Picture House.<sup>46</sup> Madan Theatres' control over cinema houses in Calcutta is corroborated repeatedly in the ICCE in 1927 where several witnesses accuse them of exercising monopolistic practices.

This monopolistic control over exhibition in Calcutta was detrimental to the growing body of local independent producers who had been emerging from the late teens and found it very difficult to break into the exhibition circuit. Madan Theatres took

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<sup>43</sup> Bhaumik, "Emergence," 53

<sup>44</sup> Aurora states there are 12 cinemas in Calcutta. ICCE, vol. 2, 669.

<sup>45</sup> *Nachghar*, III, no. 19, September-October, 1927, 67.

<sup>46</sup> it is unclear if DuCasse was still around in 1927 – he does not appear in the ICCE.

advantage of its ownership of cinemas in the city and demanded exorbitant rates to distribute and exhibit films from small producers. As seen in Chapter 2, producers like Choudhury complained of their inability to find distribution and, even in instances where films were handed over to Madan for distribution, they were not adequately publicised or distributed. Thus, independent films lost out to Madan home productions due to their inability to find adequate circulation. The Madans' monopoly and how that impacted the industry in Calcutta is discussed further in the final section of this chapter.

To counter the threat faced by independent producers the Russa Theatre had been built in 1921 in southern Calcutta, as a direct response to this problem. A few entrepreneurs, including Aurora's Anadi Bose, got together to inaugurate the first independent cinema for Bengali films. The theatre was located in Bhowanipore, away from the two key cinema districts in north and central Calcutta. However, Bhowanipore held a distinct locational advantage: it was a rapidly developing area in the city and the Bengali middle class was migrating from north Calcutta southwards to this area. From the late 1930s several cinema theatres cropped up in the Bhowanipore area and it became the third major site of cinema exhibition within the city.

A few other cinemas started to come up in the late 1920s. In its findings, the ICC Report of 1928 states that, compared to the size of the audience, there were very few cinema theatres in India. The same statement can be applied to Calcutta – for the size of the city there were very few cinema theatres, despite the fact that there was a steady rise in permanent cinemas across the city through the 1920s. It must be stressed here that these new cinemas were not necessarily restricted to the three entertainment districts but were also coming up in other parts of the city and its suburbs, pointing to the spread of the 'cinema habit'. A good example of this would be cinemas in Howrah, a satellite town across the river, where the main railway station for Calcutta was located. Howrah was undergoing rapid industrialisation and

thus saw an increased migration of working classes seeking employment in the factories of Calcutta.<sup>47</sup>

From the mapping of cinemas we can see that the rise of cinema houses in Calcutta corresponded to the rise in local production of films; however, none of the cinemas in the city exclusively showed local films.<sup>48</sup> Several producers and exhibitors complained to the ICC that while there was a large demand for locally made films not enough were being made. Rather, a mix of local and foreign films was the norm, suggesting that demand far outweighed the availability of locally produced films. The meagre supply of local films was a big problem for exhibitors, so much so that we find that despite being established as an independent cinema set up to counter the Madans' dominance, the Russa screened *Nal Damayanti* (1921), a Madan production, in November 1921, within the first year of its opening.

While the number of local productions steadily rose through the 1920s, they did not meet the sharply mounting demand for films. The resultant shortfall in local films was made up by showing foreign films, which continued to be in large supply in the Indian market in general, and in Calcutta in particular, as discussed in the following section. According to ICC figures, 85 percent of films on Indian screens at this time were foreign, and a large chunk of this screen space belonged to Hollywood, with a handful of British, French and other European films (including German and Italian films).<sup>49</sup>

The slow rise in cinema theatres was a likely fall-out of this phenomenon. The growth of the cinema lies in being able to find new audiences. Across the world the popularity of film in its first few decades has been largely seen to be an urban phenomenon with a dedicated following amongst the urban working classes. As

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<sup>47</sup> However, the concern in this chapter is not to provide a complete list of cinemas in the city; rather by focussing on the two main cinema districts it tries to understand the growth of the 'cinema habit' in the city.

<sup>48</sup> ICC, Table 5, 181.

<sup>49</sup> Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, 42.

discussed in Chapter 1, high levels of migration into the city from Bengal and surrounding provinces through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries led to the rapid increase of the working class population in Calcutta. Thus the potential for growth of the local film industry lay in targeting the growing urban working classes of the city – audiences that would in general identify with the vernacular aesthetics of local productions. And since local film productions were not increasing in proportion to the audience base, it could be argued that investors saw little potential in building new cinemas dedicated to showing local films.

The continued popularity of Hollywood films in Calcutta, on the other hand, led to an increase in the number of cinema theatres being built in the late 1920s and 1930s that were dedicated to showing foreign films. This growth was propelled not just by the increased capital flow within the Calcutta industry but also by Hollywood’s direct presence in the city, as discussed below. But, apart from Hollywood, international capital was very much present in Calcutta from the earliest days of permanent cinema exhibition through Bandmann’s significant involvement, and this continued in later decades. An entry in the Bengali film and theatre journal, *Nachghar*, in early 1928, for instance, announces the construction of a plush new theatre in the “white town”, by the “Bandman Company”.<sup>50</sup> However, the *Nachghar* entry also reports that Bandmann Varieties would give up Empire Theatre to the Madans from the following year (i.e. 1929).<sup>51</sup> Evidently, the Madans were continuing with the policy of acquiring cinema theatres in their efforts at controlling film exhibition in the city, even after the ICC enquiry into monopolistic trade practices.

Things changed by the 1930s. As discussed in Chapter 2, the fall of the Madans was complemented by increased investment coming into the industry from a number of sources. Businessmen like Khemka, Chameria, Chokhani etc. were entering the industry in the 1930s, setting up new studios. And nearly all the new studios directly

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<sup>50</sup> *Nachghar* IV, no. 33, January-February, 1928.

<sup>51</sup> Bandmann had died in 1922, and Stephen in early 1927, but Bandmann Varieties continued to operate after Bandmann’s death.

controlled cinema theatres, thus ensuring a steady screening of their films. The diffusion of ownership also brought in a more competitive environment in the exhibition sector. Several of the prominent new picture houses that started in the early and mid 1930s included Chitra and New Cinema, owned by New Theatres; Paradise (c. late 1935) that was backed jointly by East India Films and Radha Films and Rupabani (c. 1933, possibly owned by Ganguly of Kali Films).<sup>52</sup> International investment in cinemas is apparent from the opening of two cinemas in Chowringhee: New Empire (pre-1935) by Bandmann Varieties Ltd. and Lighthouse (c. 1938, ownership unknown).<sup>53</sup> Another new cinema that was inaugurated in late 1935 was the Metro Cinema, owned by MGM.

The opening of Metro signalled the direct presence of Hollywood in the exhibition sector in Calcutta and is another instance of Hollywood's efforts at making inroads into the Indian film market – an effort that was started by Universal in 1916 through the opening of its own distribution agency in India.<sup>54</sup> The Metro was built in the trendy art deco style, at the top end of Chowringhee Road, and is prominently visible in photographs of Chowringhee for its distinctive architecture. MGM went on to build another cinema in Bombay in 1938, also christened Metro, and with a similar art-deco architecture and colour scheme, that resonated with the Calcutta Metro. This was clearly Metro's effort at branding in the Indian market.

The Metro cinemas in Calcutta and Bombay were both designed by Thomas Lamb, a leading international cinema architect based in New York.<sup>55</sup> This link between architecture and film was not new in Calcutta. Earlier, the Madan Palace of Varieties was also built in the art deco style - another instance of the Madans' deliberate efforts at tapping into global trends in film culture. Moreover, this was not the only example

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<sup>52</sup> Kali Films' letterhead gives its address as Rupabani bulding.

<sup>53</sup> Announcements of new theatres opening regularly appeared in the studio news sections in film journals, including *Nachghar*, *Chitrlekha*, *Varieties* etc.

<sup>54</sup> Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, 41

<sup>55</sup> Lamb constructed a large number of cinemas worldwide, with at least 48 in New York alone. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/05/realestate/05scap.html>.

of an international architect constructing cinema theatres in Calcutta. Lighthouse, another new cinema built behind New Market in c. 1938, was built by a well-known Dutch architect, W.M. Dudok; however, it is not clear who had commissioned the project. These examples suggest that in the 1930s there was a concerted inflow of capital from Hollywood in the exhibition sector in Calcutta. This, along with Universal's rumoured plans of takeover of Madan Theatres in the late 1920s,<sup>56</sup> suggests Hollywood's interest in firming up plans in the South Asian market.

The mapping of cinemas in Calcutta therefore draws out the close connections with real estate development in the city, right from the late 1890s into the 1930s - a feature also seen in Bombay in the late teens.<sup>57</sup> The mapping also reveals that the growth of cinemas in Calcutta was closely linked to the infusion of mercantile capital from local investors: Arratoon Stephen, J. F. Madan, the Bengali promoters of Russa in the early years, and then Marwari businessmen like Khemka and Chameria from the late 1920s. In addition, there was a significant presence of transnational capital in exhibition through the involvement of Maurice Bandmann initially, and in later years, the direct presence of Hollywood.

### **3.2 CONDITIONS OF CINEMAS**

This concentration of cinemas in neighbourhoods impacted the conditions of theatres and the experience of cinema going in Calcutta. The first obvious distinction between the two cinema districts through the 1920s is that the Chowringhee theatres did not screen Indian films. Indian films were screened intermittently in the north Calcutta theatres, in Russa in the southern part and in all the central city cinemas that lay outside the European quarters, including the Tent on the Maidan, and those on Dharmatalla Street, which Indian audiences frequented. In addition, these theatres regularly screened foreign films, many of them second run or even 'junk' films as discussed below. According to Table 5 in the ICC Report there were no theatres

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<sup>56</sup> Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, 65.

<sup>57</sup> Bhaumik, "Emergence," 24.

solely devoted to the exhibition of Indian films in Bengal in 1927, and few elsewhere in the country.<sup>58</sup> On the other hand several city theatres exclusively screened foreign films.

Several respondents in the ICCE agree that foreign films helped to sustain the film business across South Asia in the 1920s. Interestingly, in the Bengal province, there is a negligible difference between the number of cinemas that screened only foreign films (11) and those that screened both foreign and Indian films (13). This is in sharp contrast to the figures for Bombay province, which had 19 cinemas devoted to foreign films and 53 cinemas showing both. This figure not only reflects the larger output of the Bombay industry in 1927-8 but also the larger number of permanent cinemas being built across the province of Bombay. Additionally, I would suggest that this figure also reflects the high demand for foreign films in permanent cinemas of Bengal, pointing to a difference in film cultures between the Bengal and Bombay provinces. Here it is worth noting that ‘Bombay’ in the ICC, and in most figures of the time, refers to the whole of the Bombay province including the port of Aden, and not just the city of Bombay.

Bhaumik argues that there was more capital coming into the cinema industry in Bombay (the city), especially in the teens, resulting in a significant rise in the number of cinema houses.<sup>59</sup> In contrast, Calcutta did not see a similar infusion of capital in the teens and early 1920s, as discussed in this thesis, and thus fewer cinemas were built in the city. Mahadevan builds on Bhaumik’s argument, referring to the higher number of travelling cinemas in Bengal as compared to the rest of the country to argue that film culture was less urbanised in Bengal when compared to Bombay.<sup>60</sup> However, as I argue here Calcutta as a metropolitan centre had a strong urban film culture that was markedly different from the rest of the province of Bengal.

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<sup>58</sup> ICC, Table 5, 181.

<sup>59</sup> Bhaumik, “Emergence,” 25.

<sup>60</sup> Mahadevan, “Traffic in Technologies.”

According to ICC, 14 of 26 permanent cinemas in Bengal were located in Calcutta, thus suggesting that there were few permanent cinemas across the rest of the province.<sup>61</sup> The paucity of permanent cinemas outside the metropolis would explain the high occurrence of travelling cinemas in the province to meet the growing demand for films. Perhaps Bengal lent itself more to the travelling cinema culture because of the lack of capital flowing into the industry, as well as the fact that it was easy for these exhibitors to venture into the neighbouring states of Bihar, Orissa and Assam, all of which constituted the Bengal territory for distribution purposes (see below). While these states offered a ready market for travelling cinemas based in Calcutta, income levels across the territory in general were extremely low. Thus arguably the territory of Bengal did not offer a high enough potential of returns for investors to build permanent cinemas. As a result travelling cinemas persisted across the Bengal territory in the 1920s.

As we see in the Aurora documents discussed in the following chapter, there were a number of requests to screen films in semi-permanent venues across the Bengal territory in the early 1930s from hopeful exhibitors, suggesting that there was at least a desire to move away from the trend of travelling cinemas. Given the diverse economic conditions across the Bengal Presidency, and the rest of India, all these varying exhibition practices continued to co-exist, catering to different strata of audiences within the metropolis, and outside, in the *mofussil* and the villages. This recognition of a complex terrain of film circulation, in the 1920s, complicates any attempt to develop a homogeneous conception of circulation across South Asia.<sup>62</sup>

The high ratio of cinemas screening only foreign films in Bengal is also significant. It can be safely assumed that the majority of these cinemas were located in the Chowringhee area, given the concentration of European and Anglo-Indian

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<sup>61</sup> ICC, Table 2, 180.

<sup>62</sup> Indeed, Mahadevan recognises the complexities in the South Asian case by underlining the difference between Bombay and Bengal and through his argument of ‘junk’ prints and revivification of the life of a film through the circulation of ‘junk’ prints in the provinces. Mahadevan, “Traffic in Technologies.”

populations in the area. We also know that Indian audiences were not entirely shut out of the Chowringhee theatres. As discussed in Chapter 1, a select group of elite Indians had been allowed entry into European spaces of entertainment from the early nineteenth century. Respondents in the Calcutta volumes of the ICCE agree that elite Indians preferred to visit the Chowringhee cinemas and watch foreign films, often favouring these over local Indian productions. A good case in point is the Globe Theatre, in Calcutta. As mentioned above it was a European theatre long before it was converted into an independent cinema in the teens, and was then bought over by the firm called Globe Theatres Ltd. of India, Burma and Ceylon.<sup>63</sup> N. C. Laharry, whom we encountered in Chapter 2, was the manager of Globe, Calcutta, from the time of its takeover in 1922.<sup>64</sup> In the ICCE deposition Laharry asserts that the Globe had continued to cater to the mixed, and elite, audience base that came with the theatre at the time of its acquisition:

“... when we bought the Globe theatre, - it was a European theatre before, - 40 per cent of our audience was purely European, about 50 per cent are Anglo-Indians, Jews and Military population and 10 per cent Indians. We have continued the system. We have to cater to the requirements of our audiences.”<sup>65</sup>

Articles in contemporary film journals and memoirs also bear testimony to the fact that the *bhadralok* considered the Chowringhee theatres to be respectable whilst the other cinemas were considered to be seedy and disreputable. Given its elite clientele ticket prices in Chowringhee theatres were high. Sukumar Sen recalls that Picture House was the “VIP cinema” theatre in those days, patronised by the British and wealthy Indians. It was quite small and the cheapest ticket was priced at a costly Rs.

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<sup>63</sup> The ownership of the firm is unclear, but it’s clear it was an exhibition chain with theatres across South Asia. Bhaumik refers to a Bombay distributor, KD and Brothers, who owned Globe in Bombay. But this may not mean that this Bombay-based company owned Globe, Calcutta, because as per the ICC figures Globe imported 90% of its films through Calcutta and 10% Rangoon (see Laharry deposition and ICC import figures). If Globe was owned by a Bombay firm it would have imported the majority of its film via Bombay. As films arrived from the West it was economically viable to import films through Bombay port, unless this was done by a Calcutta or Rangoon based company.

<sup>64</sup>Laharry was an old hand in the industry by this time. He is introduced as manager of Globe Theatres in the ICCE, but he was one of the producers of the Indo-British Film Company in the early 1920s, as discussed in chapter 2, and before that had worked with the Madans. ICCE, vol.2, 760.

<sup>65</sup> ICCE, vol.2, 780.

2, while the cheapest in other theatres was between 4 to 8 annas.<sup>66</sup> The cheapest ticket in the Globe, the other elite cinema house, was 4 annas.<sup>67</sup> Several people insist that DuCasse's independent cinema, The Bijou, screened good foreign films that were not screened elsewhere, and thus many Indian students and unwaged bought the 4 anna seats in The Bijou.<sup>68</sup> After the takeover, The Globe carried on this tradition of the 4 anna seats, although the other tickets were priced at a steep Re. 1, Rs. 2 and Rs. 3, and without the intermediary class of 8 annas. When questioned on whether the 4 anna tickets were bought by "menials belonging to western households" Laharry answered,

"I don't think we get the menial class very much, nor do we get a large number of the illiterate class."<sup>69</sup>

The Globe was an elite theatre and in the strictly hierarchical society of colonial Calcutta the "menials" and "illiterates" would have had their designated entertainment spaces in other theatres and tent-houses in the vicinity. Students and educated young men were, however, welcome to these 4 anna seats, as were European soldiers and sailors. Evidence suggests that educated Indians regularly visited the other cinemas in the vicinity of Chowringhee to see films even if they were considered disreputable, sometimes on cinema-going outings when tickets were sold out in the Chowringhee theatres. Satyajit Ray recalls one such incident from his childhood:

"An uncle of mine had taken me to the Globe to see the first Johnny Weissmuller Tarzan film. Going to the bioscope in those days being a rare and breathlessly awaited event, it was heartbreaking to learn that there were no seats to be had. Obviously touched by the sign of dismay on my face, my uncle took me walking four hundred yards to the Albion to see [the Madan produced] *Kaal Parinaya* instead. I still remember his growing discomfiture as the risqué drama

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<sup>66</sup> A rupee equalled 16 annas.

<sup>67</sup> Sen, "Diner Pore Din," reprinted in Sugata Sinha, ed., *Jugopat* 2, no. 2 (2004): 41.

<sup>68</sup> Sugata Sinha, ed., *Jugopat* 2, no. 2 (2004): 30. Also see Choudhury, *Nijere Haraye Khunji* vol. I, 221.

<sup>69</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 780

unfolded, and his urgently and periodically whispered ‘let’s go home’ being met with a stony silence.”<sup>70</sup>

Expectedly, the 4 anna seats – the cheapest seats in the house - often sold out quickly. Moreover, in March 1933, the Chitra cinema, owned by New Theatres, introduced advance bookings for the 4 anna seats, suggesting that these seats were in high demand. A studio news entry in the English language film journal from Calcutta, *Varieties Weekly*, suggests that previously there had been no advance booking for these seats.<sup>71</sup>

Naturally conditions of the cinemas varied between theatres with an European and wealthy Indian clientele, like Globe, and those frequented by the Indian masses, as did the print quality and the conditions under which films were screened. Sukumar Sen recalls that the Elphinstone Picture Palace was the best cinema in those days, and others recalling the cinemas of the 1920s corroborated this.<sup>72</sup>

Ray recalls that as a child he primarily grew up watching Chaplin, Keaton and Fairbanks in the elite Chowringhee cinemas:

“The cinema that we loved to go to then was the Madan [Palace of Varieties], where the mellifluous tones of the Wurlitzer organ drowned the noise of the projector while heightening the drama on the screen. The Globe was nice too. It didn’t have an organ, but it had turns on the stage during intermission. Both the Globe and the Madan showed first-run foreign films, as did the Elphinstone, the Picture Palace [sic] and the Empire. They all stood clustered in the heart of Calcutta’s filmland, exuded swank and boasted an elite clientele.

“On the other hand, the cinemas showing Indian films, such as the Albion, were dank and seedy. One pinched one’s nose as one hurried past the toilet in the lobby into the auditorium, and sat on hard, creaky wooden seats. The films they showed, we were told by our elders, were not suitable for us. Since the elders always decided what we should see, the choice inevitably fell on foreign films, usually American.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> *Cinema Vision*, vol.1, no.1 (1980), 6

<sup>71</sup> *Varieties Weekly*, March 18, 1933, 16

<sup>72</sup> Sen, “Diner Pore Din,” reprinted in Sugata Sinha, ed., *Jugopat 2*, no. 2 (2004): 41.

<sup>73</sup> *Cinema Vision*, vol.1, no.1 (1980), 6

The Ripon Theatre, located in central Calcutta, was another rundown cinema which only released second run films and the audience is described by Sukumar Sen as “*mechho-hature*” or working class. He describes going to watch an Annette Kellerman film, *Queen of the Sea* (1918), at Ripon. The film had previously been shown in Calcutta and was now being screened at this run down cinema. Sen says that this was a long film (50 minutes), and on this occasion the operator was cranking the film very fast, despite loud protests by the audience.<sup>74</sup>

This vignette gives us a rare and vivid insight into exhibition conditions transporting us into the cinemas of the late teens/ early 1920s, and brings home a basic fact: the experience of viewing at the cinema was as much contingent on the quality of the film, projection equipment etc. as it was on the operator.<sup>75</sup> This anecdote also allows us to speculate on the reasons for this cinematic malfunction. Was the operator inexperienced? Was the venue running short of time, given that this was a long film? Did the exhibitors not want the viewers to dwell on the moving images unfolding on the screen? This was a risqué film and a major reason for its popularity was the full nudity shown on screen. Given the anxiety of the administration regarding the effects of the cinema on the masses in Calcutta (see below), and keeping in mind that the audience in the Ripon Theatre was working class, it is not entirely unlikely that the theatre manager may have instructed the operator to rush through the reels in order to avoid any untoward attention by the censors.

This coexistence of a range of audiences in the cinemas of Calcutta is not acknowledged by received histories. A recent study of the ICC points out that policymakers had some understanding of a heterogeneous audience.<sup>76</sup> The ICC

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<sup>74</sup> Sen, “Diner Pore Din,” reprinted in Sugata Sinha, ed., *Jugopat* 2, no. 2 (2004): 41.

<sup>75</sup> This reminder of the materiality of the cinema and its dependence on exhibitors seems far removed from the standardised viewing experience offered by digital technology today and the abstract relationship between the viewer and the exhibitor.

<sup>76</sup> Dass, “The Crowd Outside the Lettered City: Imagining the Mass Audience in 1920s India,” *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 4 (2009): 77-98.

questionnaire includes references to a generalised “Indian audience” (Question 4 and 6.a.) while at the same time it makes a distinction between “the educated classes” and the “illiterate population” (Question 6.b.).<sup>77</sup> As Dass argues this “repeated differentiation between the two classes of Indians undercut any notion of a homogeneous national community of filmgoers.”<sup>78</sup> This class differentiation is expressed in the ICC as an intense anxiety with regard to the illiterate masses, voiced repeatedly by the educated middle-class Indian elite as well as colonial administrators.

However, I would argue against Dass, that a more nuanced understanding of cinema audiences is available in the ICCE, not from the Committee members but within the industry. The ICCE discussion with Globe’s Laharry indicates that even the top end of the trade had a very distinct understanding of discrete audience classes and the varied conditions of exhibition. For instance, when questioned about the poor quality of print of second hand films Laharry insists that these too have value. Not all of these prints were worn out, he says, there were still some old films circulating in the market that had not been shown very much. These films had diminished in value as they were old but could still be shown in second run theatres in the city, like the Ripon, and thus continued to be worth some money to the distributor and the exhibitor.

The Chairman quizzes:

“Chairman: You mean the Indian public will stand them?

A: A certain section of the Indian public will stand them.

Q: But you would not dare to show them in your Chowringhi theatres?

A: Because I have already shown them and my rights have expired.”<sup>79</sup>

This awareness of the layered nature of exhibition in major cities of colonial India by both the industry and policymakers not only played out through regulation and censorship, but also translated into practices that reinforced class distinctions. As

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<sup>77</sup> ICC Questionnaire

<sup>78</sup> Dass, “The Crowd Outside the Lettered City,” 84.

<sup>79</sup> ICCE vol.2, 782.

Dass argues: “Spectatorship emerged in colonial India as a site not just of imagining community but also of asserting class difference and social hierarchies.”<sup>80</sup> This is evident in Laharry’s rejection of the menial class as a part of his audience, or in the young Ray being advised against visiting the “dank and seedy” Albion.

However, the pedantic detail in the ICCE also helps to bring out the rich texture of everyday industrial practices in the metropolitan centres of cinema in 1920s India.<sup>81</sup> This detail allows us an insight into the local industry in Calcutta, helping to locate these practices within the specific context of colonial urban India. Thus, J. J. Madan’s crucial distinction between first-run theatres in India and America (below) reminds us that there is no one standardised history of the emergence of cinema worldwide, despite the fact that film was a global entity and there was a sharing of similar practices globally. It would be erroneous to suggest that there was a direct transfer of practices from Hollywood to the rest of the world. There is no denying that borrowings from Hollywood did occur everywhere. But equally, a distinct set of local practices evolved alongside, as seen from the enquiry into the Calcutta industry:

“The system of First-run or Key Theatres exists in America where it plays an important part in the sale of pictures but under the present conditions such a system does not exist in this country. There are important theatres which may be termed as first-run houses only in the sense that the really first class productions are first shown in such houses. The only advantage of first-run houses in India is that a picture is shown in a good location which has a large seating capacity and in a well appointed place where entertainment can be accompanied by elaborate musical programmes and other attractive arrangements. It differs from the American first run houses as the exhibition of such pictures has no bearing in enhancing their market value. These Theatres as a rule exhibit a feature film continuously for one week.”<sup>82</sup>

As J.J.’s quote above indicates, films were not necessarily shown continuously for the entire week at a cinema, except for first-run cinemas in major Indian cities. Smaller

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<sup>80</sup> Dass, “The Crowd Outside the Lettered City,” 79.

<sup>81</sup> I characterize this practice as metropolitan because the respondents were the elite and urbanised, even if they were not quite based in the urban centres of Bombay, Calcutta, Karachi, Lahore, Madras and Rangoon.

<sup>82</sup> ICCE vol.2, 829-830

cinemas usually ran a film for three days – as will be seen from discussions in the following chapter.

Memoirs, entries and adverts in contemporary journals, on the other hand, give us a sense of specific localised exhibition practices in the city of Calcutta. We know, for instance, that films released on a Saturday - a practice that was also linked to the English stage and the Bengali Public Theatre in the city. Cinemas usually held two shows in the evenings, at 6:30 p.m. and 9:30 p.m. The two annual festival seasons in Calcutta occasioned special festival programmes that included a string of screenings from morning to late night. These were in September/October, on the occasion of the Bengali Durga Puja festival, and over the Christmas/New Year period, and ran over several days in the two annual holiday weeks. Laharry's evidence suggests that new films were not screened in these two weeks; rather this was the chance to re-exhibit the hit or "super" films of the year.<sup>83</sup> Again, all of these practices came down to the cinema from the theatre in Calcutta. By the 1930s the growing volume of film journals would also bring out annual issues that often coincided with one or the other of these festivals – a practice that was in keeping with the large range of little magazines that were published in Bengal at the time, thus ensuring that the cinema plugged into a wider cultural tradition.

Apart from these festival weeks, other efforts at drawing in crowds to the cinema are also apparent. For instance, Sen refers to 'Fun Fridays' organised by the Elphinstone (owned by Madan) every Friday when "comic films" were screened, in an effort to draw in children and young people.<sup>84</sup> This is just one early instance of the use of branding as an exhibition practice in the cinema.

A now-forgotten practice that evolved specific to the silent cinema was that of multiple language inter-titles. As discussed in Chapter 1, Calcutta was a cosmopolitan city with several communities settling down. As we will see in the following chapter,

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<sup>83</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 771

<sup>84</sup> Sen, "Diner Pore Din," reprinted in Sugata Sinha, ed., *Jugopat* 2, no. 2 (2004): 41.

multiple language title-cards were commonly used in the silent era in India. Each title card could contain inter-titles that were written in as many as five languages. This practice evolved specific to the cinema, (as opposed to the theatre), and in the less elite cinemas that were frequented by illiterate audiences it resulted in one charitable member loudly reading out inter-titles on the screen for the benefit of his fellows in the gallery (the cheaper seats), and much to the annoyance of other members of the audience.<sup>85</sup> Of course, the coming of sound put an end to this. Multiple language inter-titles is a significant indicator of the co-presence of multilingual audiences in cinemas across South Asia. A commonly repeated argument is that the coming of sound fragmented what was otherwise a vast market for 'Indian cinema'. However, the wide use of multilingual title cards for silent films suggests the presence of alternate language practices even before the talkies.

Thus, one distinction that can be made in exhibition practices is that between first-run and second-run theatres, predicated on class (elite and illiterate) within the metropolis. The other key differentiation is one that the trade makes based on audience communities: between theatres with European, Anglo-Indian and educated Indian audiences and those theatres that catered to exclusively Indian audiences. The ICC documents, along with journals and memoirs, signal multiple layers in cinema audiences in 1920s India. A further subdivision occurs along linguistic communities, seen through the use of multi-lingual inter-titles, and this differentiation becomes much more pronounced with the coming of sound. Thus the discussions in the ICCE already point to a complexly layered audience and not just a simple class division between the elite and the masses. The fragmentation of the cinema audience and associated practices, like price differentiation, that developed as a result, can be historicised by drawing continuities with the Bengali Public Theatre. However, practices specific to the cinema also evolved, most notably multilingual title-cards that enabled the simultaneous presence of a range of audiences in the cinema theatre.

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<sup>85</sup> Choudhury, *Nijere Haraye Khunji*, vol.1.

Despite making these distinctions, the ICCE discussions also suggest that these are dynamic categories that are continually changing, defying any attempts at developing a fixed notion of cinema audiences in 1920s India. For instance, Laharry is quick to point out that conditions in north Calcutta cinemas were improving when the Committee recommends that he could set up a cinema there. The Committee tries to convince him by suggesting that it need not be an expensive proposition since a cinema in north Calcutta would only need “to suit the ordinary Indian public”, and not an upmarket one like the Globe. Laharry retorts that it would cost Rs 5-6 lakhs,<sup>86</sup> as “Tastes are changing now”. The Committee answers that perhaps it may be better to have a number of small theatres rather than one or two large ones. Laharry emphasises the difference between metropolitan and small town exhibition by answering:

“Yes, in smaller towns; but as competition comes in, my experience is that you must give other creature comforts too to the audience.”<sup>87</sup>

Laharry’s response suggests an acute awareness on the part of the trade that audience habits and viewing conditions were continually changing, especially in a modern global city like Calcutta that was linked into global entertainment circuits and faced increased competition. The Committee continues to operate on the assumption of a simple class differentiation between the elite and the masses, and this is evident in the questioning, but Laharry’s answer above suggests a refusal to be pinned down by this polarity and points to a more nuanced understanding of the fragmented audience of the cinema. The ICC persists saying that,

“You are thinking of the audience you are catering for, but the poor people will be squatting on the floor and see, they won’t require sofa seats, boxes and so on, and if they cannot get a good seat, they would prefer to sit down”.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> A lakh is equivalent to a hundred thousand rupees.

<sup>87</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 782-3

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

Laharry finally agrees with the Committee members on the account that it may be a “step to build up the independent industry”.<sup>89</sup>

Laharry’s reference to changing tastes and increased desire for “creature comforts” is also corroborated later in the late 1920s and early 1930s when film journals announced the inauguration of new cinemas with great fanfare. These announcements, almost always, focussed on the conditions of the cinema, on added comforts like better seats and air conditioning,<sup>90</sup> and sometimes with celebrities and public figures being called upon to inaugurate these theatres. The two NT-owned cinemas were opened to the public by leading Bengalis: NT’s flagship theatre, Chitra, was inaugurated by leading nationalist figure, and Mayor of Calcutta, Subhas Chandra Bose on December 30, 1930, and the New Cinema was inaugurated by acclaimed Bengali novelist Sarat Chandra Chatterjee.<sup>91</sup> These efforts signal an organised move by the industry towards gaining respectability and in trying to promote Bengali cinema to elite Bengalis.

Changing tastes were also catered to by the entry of the Hollywood majors into the exhibition sector in the 1930s. As discussed, Metro was inaugurated on the bustling Chowringhee Road by MGM in late 1935 as part of their global expansion plans. The cinema, which still exists, was one of the finest in the city – an investment by MGM to attract a certain class of audience:

“The external and internal décor of Metro is unrivalled. Its *bandobast* (arrangements), its ambience is new, modern. But the seating arrangement is ordinary, a slight improvement on the conventional style....”<sup>92</sup> [Translation Mine]

The focus on ambience and design, apparent in the announcements of new cinemas, signal a new era in cinema going:

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<sup>89</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 783

<sup>90</sup> *Nachghar* IV, no. 33, January-February, 1928

<sup>91</sup> Bagishwar Jha, *B. N. Sircar: A Monograph*, National Film Archive of India, 1990.

<sup>92</sup> *Chitralli*, vol.1 no. 7, November-December 1935, 92-3

“Just as the lights came on at Chowringhee’s colourful Metro, the New Empire management are designing another picture house. We hear this house will be clothed in white. That is, this pleasure temple will be made totally out of marble.”<sup>93</sup> [Translation Mine]

This was not limited to the cinemas showing foreign films. As discussed above, the 1930s saw an infusion of capital into production and the industry enjoyed the benefits of organisation. Similarly, these quotes above signal that a large amount of capital was also flowing into the building of permanent cinemas in Calcutta, including international capital. Apart from Hollywood investment, the new Calcutta studios too were getting into exhibition, as a means of consolidating their business, aiming towards the vertical integration model practiced by Hollywood majors and, closer to home, by Madan Theatres:

“It’s not only the foreign producers who are building picture houses in Calcutta. The newest picture house amongst the Indian ones is East India – Radha’s Paradise. Close to Metro it will be no less in looks, quality and comfort.”<sup>94</sup>

Chapter 2 highlighted the rise in local film production in the early 1930s, and this can be correlated to the spurt in construction of new cinemas like Chitra, New Cinema and Paradise for screening Indian films. Clearly, by this time, the local studios were aiming to rival the elite Chowringhee theatres in offering Indian audiences similar “creature comforts”. However, local production still lagged behind demand and foreign films continued to have a stronghold over the market in Calcutta, as it had done from the beginning of the 1900s.

### **3.3 TERRITORY OF INDIA: CASE CALCUTTA**

The previous section saw the industry arguing for the importance of foreign films in sustaining the Indian market, and fighting for its continued import and distribution in

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid. This entry suggests that New Empire was operational before 1935. Was it owned by the same group that managed Empire cinema, the one owned by Arratoon Stephen/Maurice Bandman duo? This new cinema could also be Lighthouse, which was located adjacent to New Empire.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

India. This section studies the distribution sector in more detail in the effort to understand the early period of circulation of films in South Asia. Considering the pan-Indian circulation of film in the first three decades of the 1900s is extremely important as this was the base on which the indigenous industry developed. As discussed above, indigenous production only accounted for approximately 15 percent of Indian screen space in 1927. Local productions, which were on the rise in the 1920s, saw a remarkable increase towards the end of the decade; yet, this increase was unable to meet the demand and foreign films continued to dominate Indian screens well into the 1930s. Under the circumstances a regular circulation of foreign film from the teens helped to keep the 'cinema habit' alive and build local and inter-regional circulation networks on which the later indigenous industries piggybacked. This symbiotic relationship between foreign and local film sustained the growth of exhibition across the territory of India. This section will examine the circulation of film in South Asia in greater detail. While some of these practices can be generalised to refer to pan-Indian practices my primary focus remains Calcutta, and how these practices played out in Calcutta and the eastern circuit.

### **3.3.1 JUNK FILM IMPORTS, AGENCIES AND FILM DISTRIBUTION**

For the purposes of the global film trade the territory that was defined as India also included Burma and Ceylon. It should be stressed here that India, in this context, refers to pre-Partition India, that is, the present day nation states of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan.

In the first three years of the film trade films entering the Indian market were either brought in by local entertainers like Arratoon Stephen and Mr. Hudson of Theatre Royal; by techno-visual enthusiasts, like members of the Photographic Society; or by international travelling showmen like Syd Harding, Reiley and Sullivan, to showcase this new invention in the theatres of Calcutta, as discussed above. By the turn of the century, organised importers had moved in; several of them were already involved in the import of photographic equipment and materials as sole agents of foreign firms.

The key figure for film in Calcutta was J. F. Madan, who was already acting as sole agent for a number of foreign companies and importing foreign goods to supply the army and to stock his provision stores across the country. Madan started to import and exhibit films in a tent cinema on the Calcutta Maidan from c. 1902; however, as discussed above, adverts of Madan-owned venues like the Corinthian Theatre push the date of their association with moving image exhibitions further back.

An advertisement in *The Statesman* in June, 1901, announces the exhibition of “New Sceneries, several direct from London!” in a performance of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* by the Parsi Elphinstone Dramatic Club.<sup>95</sup> The club was owned by Madan, as was the venue. The list of 12 “sceneries” includes several London scenes, scenes from a Nawab’s palace and a number of railway scenes. The “sceneries” are not announced as a separate item from the play, as a performance in the interval for instance. Thus we can conclude that the scenes are incorporated within the theatrical adaptation, possibly as a backdrop. Significantly, they are mobilised in the publicity of the play, serving as ‘attractions’, rather than trying to lure the public with star actors or directors of the Parsi stage. The palace is described in parenthesis as “a set scene”, whereas some of the London scenes are announced as “A complete set of transformation scenes”. Transformation scenes were a common element of theatrical performances and is a term associated with magic lantern ‘dissolving views’, so it is a reasonable assumption that the advert refers to the use of lantern slides. In addition, it is possible that this was indeed a mixed media show that also included film. Early film projectors were equipped with a slide attachment so that slides could be projected while changing film reels.<sup>96</sup> Further, the description of the Railway scenes suggest definitive movement (“Inspector crossing in a Trolley” or “A Railway Bridge exposed to fierce Storm and Rain”), pointing to the likelihood of these being lantern

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<sup>95</sup> Advertisement in *The Statesman*, June 1901.

<sup>96</sup> I am grateful to Prof. Ian Christie for enlightening me on the dual projector of film and lantern slides and on the common use of transformation scenes in early screen practices. Email conversation, July 11, 2011.

slides and even actuality films of London. The added description of “A Railway train actual and real.” strongly suggests that these were lantern slides and/or films, rather than a toy train,<sup>97</sup> especially given the turn-of-the-century association of photograph and film with 'real'.

This example vividly illustrates the simultaneous presence, and persistence, of several visual image technologies at the turn of the century and their coming together at sites of exhibition. It was common practice for the same travelling exhibitor to show a range of screen media within a programme – a feat not impossible given the technical affinities between the several technologies circulating at the time, as well as the fact that these were often acquired from the same source in London.

The early importers sourced their films from exchanges in London<sup>98</sup> in a manner similar to photographic equipment and materials, as discussed above. A couple of names of agencies that repeatedly crop up in Calcutta and Bombay newspapers, in the early 1900s, are the Anglo-American Bioscope Company and the Great Eastern Hotel Company, Calcutta. The latter announced themselves as the sole agents of Pathé Frères from as early as 1905 whereas the Anglo-American Bioscope can be traced back to early 1904 at the very least.<sup>99</sup> Both these companies dealt in films and film equipment, but whereas the Great Eastern were limited to Pathé films and equipment, the Anglo-American, in keeping with their name, offered a range of apparatus including the Bioscope, the Cinematograph and the Animatograph, as well as a regular supply of films “received every Mail”.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Toy trains had been used on the Calcutta stage by both Madan and A. N. Dutt at the turn of the century.

<sup>98</sup> London was the centre for the worldwide distribution of American films between 1909 and 1916. This changed during the war when American companies preferred to set up agencies in several countries or deal directly with foreign clients without going via London. See Kristin Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market, 1907-1934*, (London: BFI, 1985), 29.

<sup>99</sup> Advertisements in *The Times of India*, Bombay, and *The Statesman*, Calcutta.

<sup>100</sup> Advertisements for Anglo-American and the Great Eastern Hotel Company in *The Statesman*.

In c. 1907 Pathé Frères moved away from the agency system to set up a direct office in Calcutta – a time that roughly corresponds to the construction of the first permanent cinema theatres in Calcutta, and in South Asia. While this was in keeping with Pathé’s global strategy it also signalled a new phase in the history of film circulation in South Asia. At this time Pathé was the only foreign film producing company to directly set up an office in India. Pathé was the dominant producer worldwide in the pre-War phase, and had been aggressively expanding globally. While India did not account for large returns, Pathé, or the later Hollywood companies, recognised the value of markets like India in extending the shelf life of used film prints and therefore started to deal directly with these markets. In her extensive study of Hollywood’s world film markets Kristin Thompson writes,

“[In 1910] The main theatres would buy Pathé films direct and sell them used at half price to the travelling shows; some new topicals and used prints were obtained via the post from London.<sup>101</sup>

Film sales rather than rentals was the established norm at the time. While smaller firms continued to import films by other companies like Gaumont and Edison from London exchanges via mail order catalogues, a larger company like J. F. Madan’s Elphinstone Bioscope had the available capital to import films in bulk from London agents. Pre-World War I American firms did not have direct dealings with the world market; instead they would sell off their films to London companies, often including rights of sale in the colonies along with the rights to Great Britain.<sup>102</sup>

However, not all local exhibitors could afford to import good quality prints from London. As seen in the previous section, the growth of permanent cinemas in India was slow and the greater part of film exhibition in this period was in the hands of

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<sup>101</sup> Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment*, 33.

<sup>102</sup> American films did not depend on foreign markets for profits, they already had a large home market to realise costs and in these years American firms were not too concerned about foreign markets. Further, as this 1919 article in a trade journal pointed out, American firms had little experience of foreign markets while London had a “well-oiled organisation, established primarily for the purpose of carrying on trade in all lines with the many English colonies, which, in turn, were local distribution centers...” *Moving Picture World*, June 21, 1919, 1,838, cited in Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment*, 32.

travelling exhibitors. The very nature of itinerant exhibition meant that these men did not have the kind of capital required for regular import of films. As a result, the majority of the films circulating in India in these decades were ‘junk’ prints (or worn out copies), which were cheaply bought. London was also the centre of a flourishing ‘junk’ film business geared precisely for these smaller international exhibitors, with dedicated companies catering to this rung of the world film trade. These ‘junk’ film companies widely advertised in trade papers that circulated worldwide and also distributed flyers stating price per foot and condition of prints etc. Indian exhibitors would regularly import films based on these adverts and catalogues.<sup>103</sup>

‘Junk’ films were also sold off by permanent exhibitors once they had run out their course in the higher-class cinemas, or by foreign itinerant showmen who wanted to dispose of their wares before returning home. This was another source by which local travelling exhibitors acquired their films. As Laharry indicates in discussions in the ICCE, these ‘junk’ films would then be picked up by small-time travelling exhibitors. The global circulation of ‘junk’ films helped to increase the shelf life of the film prints. The commonness of the practice alludes to a notably stratified industry from the very early days of the cinema, and to the co-existence of several organically linked markets across wide distances that sustained these layers - an example of early globalisation that is discussed in the final chapter.<sup>104</sup>

Thus, until the early 1910s, Pathé used its direct local presence to make its films easily accessible to Indian exhibitors and keep a firm hold on the Indian market. However, by 1916, with the coming of war, the balance of power amongst global film producers had shifted towards the American companies, and London was no longer the convenient centre for world trade.<sup>105</sup> American film companies were increasingly starting to gain direct access to their foreign markets, and Universal (one of the ‘Little

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<sup>103</sup> Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment*, 34.

<sup>104</sup> As Mahadevan points out, the practice of junk films continues even today in semi-urban and rural localities within India, a practice that he terms revivification. See Mahadevan, “Traffic in Technologies.”

<sup>105</sup> Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment*, 63-4.

Three’) was the most proactive amongst them in setting up foreign offices worldwide. In 1916, Universal set up an agency in India in keeping with this policy of directly distributing their films in world markets. Undoubtedly, the American companies were wizenning up to the value of ‘junk’ prints and wanted to keep their stake in the lowest strata of the distribution ladder. By now the film trade had moved to rentals rather than outright sales as the predominant mode of distribution. The establishment of Universal in India made film rentals more accessible to smaller exhibitors in the Indian territory and a price-war was unleashed. Smaller exhibitors could source films very cheaply directly from Universal.<sup>106</sup> Pathé too opened an office in Bombay around the same time. The policy of film rentals was also more conducive to the building up of a locally networked industry, as seen in the chapter on Aurora that follows. But a sustained and stable network was not to be until the next decade when a more competitive film market emerged in South Asia.

By the late 1910s, the Calcutta-based J. F. Madan was well on his way to establishing a countrywide network of permanent cinema theatres as an outlet for the films he imported. In Bombay, for instance, Madan was showing his first feature, *Satyawadi Raja Harishchandra* (1917) in the New Alexandra, which he owned.<sup>107</sup> By 1920 Madan also owned the Excelsior and Empress cinemas in Bombay.<sup>108</sup> In 1917 Madan set up a joint venture with Bandmann in Bombay in order to expand the film import and exhibition segments.<sup>109</sup> Bhaumik has drawn out the close links between real estate development and film exhibition in Bombay in the 1910s – a phenomenon that is also apparent in Calcutta, seen in the partnership of Arratoon Stephen and Maurice Bandmann, for instance.

In addition to importing films for its own cinemas, Madan Theatres also rented films out to other exhibitors, thus serving as a distributor as well. While discussing the

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<sup>106</sup> ICCE, vol. 2, 777.

<sup>107</sup> *The Times of India*, March 4, 1918

<sup>108</sup> *The Times of India*, June 1920

<sup>109</sup> Bhaumik, “Emergence,” 55

scenario in Bombay, Bhaumik draws out the connections between local distribution and “global networks of film circulation”,

“With the establishment of Madan Theatres, KD and Brothers and the offices of Universal Studios in Bombay, the distribution of imported films in India entered global networks of film circulation as opposed to the haphazard film-hiring services of the earlier period.”<sup>110</sup>

However, what Bhaumik ignores is that while this may have been Bombay’s entry into global networks of circulation, Madan Theatres was already involved in organised film distribution from the early 1900s in Calcutta and across South Asia. Further, given the presence of Madan and Pathé, as well as the presence of global showman Maurice Bandmann (via Arratoon Stephen, as discussed in Chapter 2), Calcutta had entered the “global networks of film circulation” a decade earlier. I will return to this in the final chapter where the links between local and global networks is discussed in relation to early film in India.

Mahadevan argues that only those exhibitors/distributors that were able to enter these global networks of film circulation were successful in the industry. While I would largely agree with this statement, there is a need to qualify it by saying that this was true only up until the 1920s. After all, NT’s success was not built on its participation in the global network. That is, NT’s success was not predicated on it; rather it flourished on the opposite scale, as a studio that upheld local culture by being able to find indigenous modes of articulation. But the climate had changed by the 1930s and increased nationalist fervour, and the associated need for an articulation of indigenous identities, meant that tapping into local sentiments was an important factor in the survival of companies. By the 1930s there was a strong local (Bengali) and subcontinental (South Asian) market that could help sustain a studio like NT. However, this is not to say that the industry totally ignored the global market. Tapping into the possibilities of a global market made economic sense as it helped to

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 56

further extend the potential for ‘exploitation’ of a film and local producers, like NT, did try to do this, as we will see in Chapter 5, by extending the distribution net.

By the 1920s several companies were involved in the distribution of foreign films in India – some like Pathé and Universal were directly connected to major global film producers; others, like Madan, functioned in the capacity of exhibitors and distributors, importing films from several sources and then renting them out across the country. By 1927, at the time the ICC Enquiry was held, the foreign film rental business was firmly in place in India. The production of local films also picked up in the mid to late 1920s, especially in Bombay and Calcutta, and to a lesser extent in Madras. But the majority of films on Indian screens continued to be foreign, although in the 1920s the balance had tilted away from French and British productions and leaned heavily towards Hollywood. Indeed it was this predominance of American films on Indian screens that troubled the colonial government enough to set up the ICC to enquire into the possibilities of curtailing Hollywood films on Indian screens, while simultaneously exploring the potential for British films to be marketed in India. The ICC was, of course, derivative of similar concerns in Britain.<sup>111</sup> However the Committee, in its final report, rejected the idea of having a quota for Empire Films,<sup>112</sup> thereby leaving the field open for Hollywood’s unfettered circulation in India. What follows is an examination of circulation practices based on the ICCE discussions with the industry in Calcutta.

### **3.3.2 CIRCULATION IN ICCE VOL. 2**

The circulation of film worldwide was organised into distinct regions, called territories, a practice which, no doubt, borrowed from existing sub-divisions in global commercial markets. As mentioned above, India included all of colonial India, Burma

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<sup>111</sup> See Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film, 1918–1929*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1971); Jaikumar, *Cinema at the End of Empire*.

<sup>112</sup> For discussions on Empire Films see Chowdhry, *Colonial India and the Making of Empire Cinema*, and Jaikumar, *Cinema at the End of Empire*.

and Ceylon. Within this territory of India there were five profit centres for the cinema: Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, Colombo and Rangoon.<sup>113</sup> Repeatedly, the contributors to the ICC state that the majority of the earnings were taken in these five cities. As N. C. Laharry says, the cinemas in the five centres “usually pay the cost and from the rest we recover the profit”.<sup>114</sup> Naturally, the major investment in exhibition spaces went into these cities and consequently, the key cinema theatres were located here.

Significantly, all five cities were port cities and were connected to each other, and to global trading ports, through well established international shipping routes, the Indian railway network and communication links, through submarine and overland cable networks.<sup>115</sup> Both Calcutta and Rangoon fell in the territory of Bengal (or the eastern circuit) for the purposes of film circulation, until 1937 when Burma ceased to be a part of British India. Further, according to respondents in the ICCE, of the five cities, Bombay, Calcutta and Rangoon were the main importing centres and films were usually premiered in these three cities,<sup>116</sup> thus pushing them higher up in the exhibition hierarchy. The territory of Bengal was thus a very significant one given that two of the five profit centres fell within this territory, and that these two centres, Calcutta and Rangoon, were crucial to film imports into South Asia. All of this made Calcutta and Rangoon key stations for the cinema in South Asia.

In the territory of Bengal, excluding these two cities, there were a total of three cinemas in the provincial capitals and 73 cinemas in the rest of the circuit. In addition Calcutta and Rangoon added 24 more cinemas, bringing the grand total of permanent

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<sup>113</sup> ICCE, vol. 2, 800

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> The laying of overland and submarine cables between 1868-70, and the opening of the Suez canal in 1869, strengthened the communication and transportation links between Britain and India, allowing for faster connections, and opening up a new chapter in global trade, commerce and cultural exchanges.

<sup>116</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 763

cinemas in the eastern circuit to 100.<sup>117</sup> Thus, a quarter of the permanent cinemas in the territory were located in Calcutta and Rangoon and, as discussed above, these cities had higher ticket prices. Thus distributors in the eastern circuit were more interested in getting their films to cinemas in Calcutta and Rangoon than anywhere else in the territory.

Madan Theatres Ltd. transcended this territorial division due to its South Asia wide circulation network that made its founder, J. F. Madan, the media mogul of South Asia by the end of the teens. The Madans had rapidly become the largest importer of films in the territory of India and, as they were based in Calcutta, they were in a position to control circulation in the city. In the ICC the Madans claim to control 65 cinemas across India, Burma and Ceylon and state that they “also work in Association with 20 Theatres who take their supply regularly from us.”<sup>118</sup>

In the 1920s other distribution-exhibition chains too had emerged. ‘Globe Theatres Ltd. of India, Burma and Ceylon’ had grown into one such chain by 1927. The Globe’s manager in Calcutta, Laharry, claims that the firm owned five or six cinemas across India and Burma, and additionally controlled “a circuit of 35 or 36 where we supply regular programmes weekly. Then there are stray programmes here and there that we supply.”<sup>119</sup> Pathé and Universal, the two foreign chains, also continued to import films into India through the 1920s; by 1927 both had agents across the country. A fifth chain is also listed in the ICC: Alliance Trades Agency, Calcutta, who appear to be a fairly new company.<sup>120</sup> From the import figures given by J. J. Madan to the ICC, Alliance looks to be the smallest importing chain, notching up half

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<sup>117</sup> ICC, Table 2, 180. There were 14 permanent cinemas in Calcutta by 1927-28 according to ICC Table 2, and 12 in the rest of the Bengal province. Plus Assam had 1 in the capital, and 2 in the rest of the state. Bihar and Orissa are listed as 2 cinemas in the provincial capital and 11 in the rest of the 2 states. Burma has 10 cinemas in Rangoon and 48 in the rest of the province.

<sup>118</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 826.

<sup>119</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 770.

<sup>120</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 772-3.

the number of reels as compared to that imported by Globe.<sup>121</sup> Apart from these there were a few small firms across the country directly importing films, and Aurora was one of them.<sup>122</sup>

According to J. J. Madan's testimony in the ICCE the majority of film imports were through the port in Calcutta, although the ICC figures contradict this. The ICC tables show that more films were imported via Bombay than Calcutta.<sup>123</sup> The Committee takes up this discrepancy when questioning J. J. Madan although, surprisingly, it is not pursued very much. Madan's statement can be read as one made in self-interest. Madan was trying to argue against the proposal of having a single censor board based in Bombay by suggesting that he was the highest importer, and therefore it was imperative that a censor board continued to operate out of Calcutta as the port with the highest import. Madan argued that centralising the censor board and locating it in Bombay would adversely affect his business as his company would have to then open a larger office in Bombay and shift imports from Calcutta to Bombay.

Globe's Laharry, on the other hand, states that the majority of film imports were through Bombay. According to him, apart from Universal and Pathé, Madan also imported some films through Bombay, although mostly through Calcutta. Globe imported 90 per cent of their films through Calcutta, and 10 per cent via Rangoon. This could explain the discrepancy in the figures given by the Madans and the ICC – perhaps J. J. Madan was giving figures for total imports by Madan Theatres and not just those through the Calcutta port.

Regardless of whether Bombay or Calcutta imported the major share of films, what becomes clear from these debates in the ICC is that both ports were involved in large-

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<sup>121</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 833. Between 1925 and 1927, Alliance imported 691 reels as compared to Madans' 5629 reels.

<sup>122</sup> Aurora claims to be importing films in their deposition to the ICC. There is proof of direct import by Aurora in their documents in the 1930s, but Aurora becomes big only after the ICC, from 1929 when they establish the Corporation.

<sup>123</sup> ICC Table 13, 190

scale import of films. In their import list, Madan does not mention any other local company from Bombay. Remarkably it becomes apparent that while the Bombay imports were controlled by the two foreign heavyweights, the Calcutta market was entirely controlled by local firms: Madan, Globe and Alliance. This further underlines my argument that Calcutta was well plugged into transnational circuits of circulation even exercising some control over circulation in South Asian markets.

This changed in the early 1930s when the Madan empire dissipated and the entire dynamics of the industry, both within Calcutta, and across South Asia, changed considerably. Similar to the scenario in the production sector, discussed in Chapter 2, a vacuum was created in film imports. However, unlike production, where local studios filled in the gap, no single company could come close to the domination that Madan enjoyed in circulation – both through the high volume of film imports, and in the control over exhibition across South Asia. The Madan-owned cinemas were bought over by various companies and individuals, and several distributors emerged in the Calcutta market. But none of them could come close to the trans-regional dominance enjoyed by Madan. The circulation sector was fragmented, especially so in Calcutta – the heart of the Madan empire.

As Bhaumik argues, this was also a time when Bombay companies were extending their reach into other territories.<sup>124</sup> With a higher volume of production in Bombay, and its greater strength of capital, expanding the territories of circulation outside its immediate circuit was an economic imperative for Bombay studios. The Calcutta industry, on the other hand, was in the process of being unleashed from the tight grip of the Madans. And while increased capital inflow within the Calcutta industry aided in the growth of the production and exhibition sectors, the volatility of the late 1920s and early 1930s meant that it was still some time before Calcutta studios could take advantage of the opening up of the pan-Indian market. As we will see in Chapter 4,

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<sup>124</sup> Bhaumik, “Emergence,” 56-57.

by the time Calcutta studios like NT circulated across South Asia Bombay companies had already established a firm foothold.

Among other features of circulation that are gleaned from the ICCE there are issues of censorship and block and blind bookings. Each of the five port cities had separate film censor boards. The Madras censor board was a small one as presumably they produced less than Bombay and Calcutta, and imported a much smaller volume of films in 1927.<sup>125</sup>

The Bengal Board of Film Censors (BBFC) was perceived by the industry as one of the toughest boards, and this was largely due to the fact that Bengal was considered by the colonial administration to be a politically volatile state. The primary focus of film censorship in colonial India was political content and, at the time of the ICC, the chief of the censor board in Calcutta was the Commissioner of Police.

Films banned by one board could be taken to another board for censoring and then shown in the remaining territories within the whole of South Asia. Laharry gives an example of a film that was banned in Calcutta but was then taken to Bombay for re-censoring. He explains his actions:

“...If we buy an expensive picture, unless we can show it in the 3 big towns our costs are not met, the smaller cinemas do not pay us at all. If a film is banned at Calcutta it is useless to us. When we write to the London people, they say: unless you can get a certificate of banning from the whole of your territory we cannot consider the question of replacing that picture....”<sup>126</sup>

It appears that this was a common practice. Issues of differential censorship will crop up again in Chapter 4, in the discussion of the Aurora papers. Given the vagaries of the censorship system, a countrywide distribution network was also essential for the survival of these importers who needed to ensure exhibition in several metropolitan centres to recover the cost of importing these films into the Indian territory. This

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<sup>125</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 566

<sup>126</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 775

economic necessity demanded the formation of an inter-regional network that was able to facilitate speedy circulation, and returns, on these films. By the late 1920s Indian films were able to take advantage of this network, although the network continued to be sustained by distribution of foreign films.

Thus, by 1927, the film distribution market in Calcutta was composed of large-scale importers like the Madans, smaller chains like Globe and Alliance, and independent importers like Aurora. These importers had their own exhibition outlets and also rented films out to both permanent cinemas and touring exhibitors, thereby functioning as distributors. Therefore, Globe had their own theatre within Calcutta, and Aurora had its travelling cinemas, even while Madan controlled the majority of the theatres in the city. It is, however, unclear if Alliance had a connection with any Calcutta theatres. Exhibitors of second run films and travelling exhibitors also acquired films directly from Universal and Pathé in Bombay. Apart from the Madans, Universal had the lion's share of the market, no doubt because they rented their films very cheaply. "The Universal supplies a large number of cheaper theatres all over the country. They are only suppliers", says Laharry.<sup>127</sup>

This use of the term "suppliers" to distinguish between Universal and the rest is significant. Laharry means to convey that Universal is not a distributor – it only functions as a source or a stockist for the films, as opposed to actively trying to find exhibition outlets for its films. This distinction suggests that the rest of the companies were actively involved in film distribution. This evidence contradicts Valentina Vitali's argument that distribution as a distinct sector only emerged in the 1930s.<sup>128</sup> As the following chapter will also demonstrate, a South Asia-wide distribution network for films was very much in place, certainly by the late 1920s - that is before the talkie era. Bhaumik puts this date back further asserting that Kohinoor was the first Bombay studio to establish a distribution network by 1925.<sup>129</sup> However, I would

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<sup>127</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 771

<sup>128</sup> Vitali, *Hindi Action Cinema*, 17.

<sup>129</sup> Bhaumik, "Emergence", 54.

argue that Calcutta companies had a head start with distribution, primarily because of Madan Theatres' early involvement in the circulation of films within the subcontinent and in trying to find the widest possible market for their films from the teens. The Madans were instrumental in creating a distribution net to find the widest market for their foreign film imports from the 1910s, and then used this network to push their own productions from 1917.

Universal was not the only source of acquiring prints cheaply. All distributors also accessed the lowest strata of exhibition by renting out their 'junk' films to travelling cinemas - prints that even the second run theatres rejected:

“Well, sometimes pictures get very worn out. They are taken for travelling cinema shows.

Q. Do you hold sales for such pictures every year?

A. No. Parties come to us with requests when we have second-hand films the rights of which we can sub-lease to them.”<sup>130</sup>

Laharry hastens to clarify that he does not sell many of these films as they cannot be screened in the “first or second class houses” like the Chowringhee theatres, since they were low on quality, had already been shown and the rights to these films had expired. However, as discussed in section 3.2, Laharry was well aware of the value of the 'junk' print in sustaining the lower end of the trade.

This fact of course lent a fair degree of value to the 'junk' print in the distribution sector in India, as discussed earlier in this chapter. This awareness of a multi-layered exhibition sector can be seen throughout the ICC. The industry clearly recognised that the 'junk' film business was crucial to the overall functioning of the industry as a whole, helping to sustain the lowest strata and to spread the 'cinema habit'. Not only were these films good for viewing by a section of audiences, they also helped to keep small and independent distributors and exhibitors afloat. Further, since these films were only seen by certain sections of audiences, including poorer Europeans and

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<sup>130</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 772

military men,<sup>131</sup> the continued circulation of ‘junk’ prints was not likely to hinder Indian production. Giving this argument Laharry, Aurora and others call for a reduction in, even an abolition of, import duty on second hand films arguing that this move would benefit small exhibitors and act as “an inducement to increase the business”.<sup>132</sup> The fact remains that at the time of the ICC enquiry there were very few cinemas that exclusively showed Indian films. As discussed in section 3.2, most theatres showed both foreign and Indian films since there were not enough films that were locally produced to sustain the exhibition trade.

Interestingly, in the line of questioning, the Committee assumes that foreign films were detrimental to the growth of the local industry. However the vast majority of respondents are against imposing additional duty on foreign films or creating a quota for British films. Even after rigorous cross-questioning by the Committee Laharry is adamant that in reality foreign films help independent exhibitors rather than harming the trade:

“Q: You get foreign pictures at a cheaper rate than Indian pictures and you still want to reduce or abolish the duty on them so that the country will be flooded with those cheap films and there will be less chance for Indian pictures?”

A: We have not to consider the case of Indian pictures alone. Although I am an Indian, I say that we must also consider the point of view of the European public, the military population, the Indian troops and others.

Q: Which is more paramount, the 319 million or the classes you mention?

A: All are equally paramount.

Q: You mean the man who will import second hand pictures must be encouraged further by abolishing the duty on them? In that case won’t you be flooding the country with that cheap stuff and won’t it be a handicap to the production of Indian pictures?

A: You won’t be flooding the country. There are military cinemas which are taking new pictures. If you help the small man to import these second hand pictures he will be able to make a living out of them, and you will be indirectly helping the independent industry to fight its own battle.”<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 777; 781

<sup>132</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 781-782

<sup>133</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 781

This absorbing exchange clearly shows a divide between the Committee and the respondents. Certainly, it could be argued that the Indian respondents were, in principle, against imposing quotas – as the setting up of the ICC was widely viewed in India as a means of imposing British Empire films on India.<sup>134</sup> Thus, it is not surprising that Laharry and other respondents from the industry oppose quotas per se. However, what is more interesting in the exchange above is the discourse on quality, and by extension, originality that underlines the cross-questioning. For the Committee, physical quality of the film is important along with their moral tonality. The industry, on the other hand, is acutely aware of the economic value of the second hand prints and of the films that are disparaged by the elitist Committee, which expects a more patriotic standpoint from the industry. Even the manager of an elitist cinema like the Globe, Calcutta, recognises the importance of a divergent and variegated trade as beneficial to the cinema industry. This quote and similar ones across the ICCE point to the multiplicity of cinema audiences in the city – and across South Asia – and the layered nature of film circulation and reception in the 1920s – a point that has not been adequately researched into by existing scholarship.

The prevalence of foreign films in India brings us to a common global distribution practice that was in place in the 1920s: block and blind bookings. This practice was common amongst Hollywood film distributors and was widely in use in India as well. The ICC questionnaire addressed this issue, primarily because the administration was concerned with protecting the interests of the British film industry over and above Hollywood, and the Committee was therefore exploring the viability of marketing Empire Films in India. Question 10 of the ICC questionnaire directly asks if the system existed and hindered free market expansion. In response J. J. Madan argues that there should not be a problem in exhibitors acquiring foreign films given the presence of several distributors in India catering to different sectors of the market. He does, however, make a distinction between the local distributors and the American agencies, Pathé and Universal:

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<sup>134</sup> Contemporary film journals are full of articles discussing this, suggesting that the industry viewed the ICC proceedings with skepticism. Also see Jaikumar, *Cinema at the End of Empire*.

“The position of these two foreign renting houses is quite different from the other distributors. The matter of selection of films does not rest with them, for they have to exploit whatever films which may be produced by their principals in America, not matter if they are good, bad or indifferent.”<sup>135</sup>

Madan claims that, unlike these “foreign renting houses” his firm does not control associated exhibitors “by any terms whatsoever” and exhibitors are free to “try the merits of our pictures for a certain period and decide for themselves whether they will continue their dealings with us.”<sup>136</sup> Madan’s persuasive arguments succeeded in convincing the Committee; however, this claim is open to interrogation, given that Madan Theatres cornered the distribution market by consistently acquiring the subcontinental rights to superhit Hollywood films, like *Thief of Baghdad* (1924).

All respondents to the ICC agree that distributors routinely employed the system of block and blind bookings. Block booking refers to the practice of renting out films in a package, rather than individually, so that exhibitors were forced to take mediocre and bad films along with hit or “super” films. Exhibitors in turn were forced to screen the other films in the package, even if they did not keep the box office ringing. As Madan points out, this posed a problem for exhibitors on two counts:

“In order to secure a really good Super film the Producers demand of the exhibitors to buy a number of inferior films thereby compelling the latter to show to the public pictures of a poor quality. Block Booking restricts the Exhibitor from securing the product of other Producers as he has no room for it.”<sup>137</sup>

Madan is here advocating freedom of choice for the exhibitor – choice in selecting films that exhibitors want to screen in their cinemas and the choice of going to other producers and distributors rather than be tied down to one. And, although he does not say so explicitly, Madan is also suggesting that block booking harms the trade.

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<sup>135</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 827

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 829

Laharry agrees that this practice makes it difficult for the independent exhibitors. As a distributor Laharry also provides the other point of view saying that as he is forced to buy in block he has little option but to rent in block or, “all his super pictures will be taken off and the others will idle on the shelves”,<sup>138</sup> illustrating how practices filtered down into the lowest strata of the trade.

The other practice, of blind booking, meant that exhibitors were committed to renting films without first seeing them. It appears from the ICC that adequate previewing facilities for exhibitors were not available, or in use, and exhibitors often had to resort to blind bookings. The practice of acquiring films without previewing goes back to the early years of ‘junk’ film exhibition when importers would buy film from the London exchanges based on reviews and advertisements in trade papers and catalogues circulating in India. By 1927 the star system had come into operation as well, and exhibitors relied on reviews in trade journals, as well as “Stars and Directors with the Box Office value” to choose films.<sup>139</sup> Another source of information on the films was reports - from “Agents abroad” according to Madan, or “middlemen” according to Laharry.<sup>140</sup> Madan asserts that they have agents in “Paris, London, Berlin and New York”<sup>141</sup> and also states that, “Representatives of our Firm go abroad from time to time and they also make selections on the spot.”<sup>142</sup> Laharry says that the industry could not afford to have agents abroad who were also familiar with Indian tastes and conditions but the Madans could clearly afford one.

The problem of block and blind bookings is also recognised by the chief of the Calcutta censor board. Exhibitors, he says,

“have to take a block of 10 or 12 films and they have to get their money back by showing the trash.... You find is a very good film has had a fairly long run at one house, it is followed for the next few weeks by very inferior stuff.

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<sup>138</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 763

<sup>139</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 830

<sup>140</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 829-830; 763

<sup>141</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 836

<sup>142</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 830

Q: You think there is a certain amount of inferior stuff shown?

A: A large amount of inferior stuff. It is so inferior that sitting on the sub-committee to censor such stuff one's personal inclination is to cut it out altogether. But the Committee have to consider that the trade would be put to a heavy loss if that was done."<sup>143</sup>

Despite these discussions however, the overwhelming conclusion of the report was that although block booking existed it did not pose a problem to the growth of the industry.

### **3.3.3 THE QUESTION OF MONOPOLY**

Apart from block and blind bookings the other problem that hindered exhibitors, especially independent exhibitors, was that of monopolistic practices. These accusations of monopoly underline the ICC, but are given particular stress in the Calcutta volumes. The ICC questionnaire sent out to the industry included a specific question related to the monopolistic practices in film distribution. Question number 9 directly asks if there was a "monopoly or tendency to monopoly of the supply or exhibition of films?" Expectedly the questions brought about a flurry of responses, especially from Calcutta producers and distributors and led to rigorous cross-questioning by the Committee.

Globe's Laharry alleges a "monopoly network" in operation throughout the country, which harms smaller distributors and exhibitors.<sup>144</sup> Much, if not all of these accusations are directed at the Madans, who by virtue of their large network of cinemas across South Asia, and their large volumes of film import, far outweighed any other firm. The ICC figures for imports, discussed above, show the extent to which Madan Theatres was able to control the film trade in Calcutta.

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<sup>143</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 586

<sup>144</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 762

The Madans used competitive strategies, given their greater financial capital, often acquiring distribution rights for the best available films. Laharry alleges that importers would often be unable to acquire films “with a cosmopolitan or universal appeal at reasonable prices” because they were already taken by Madan.<sup>145</sup> Further, Laharry says, Madan would undercut other distributors in their efforts to capture the market:

“If I can show pictures only in 30 stations I must charge perhaps a little more than theatres – suppose there is somebody else who owns a hundred theatres, he can charge a little less. He will go to a place even if he does not own a theatre there; he will say ‘If he is giving films to you for 20 I will give you for 5.’”<sup>146</sup>

The Madans had an exclusive deal with some of the theatres that they controlled, says Laharry.<sup>147</sup> Laharry, of course, was in direct competition with the Madans, given that they were the two largest indigenous distributors in the country and thus these allegations could be seen as posturing before the ICC. However, Laharry is not the only complainant: the ICCE is replete with similar allegations against the Madans.

J. J. Madan though refutes this allegation saying that the exhibitors in his circuit had the option of approaching other distributors. However, he does hint that he has a few exclusive contracts, although he claims that these are at the behest of the exhibitors and not forced upon by the Madans. Extraordinarily the ICC does not press him on the issue. The ICC Report concluded that the allegations of monopolistic practices in the market were unfounded and what was seen as monopoly was simply fair competition.

### **COUNTERING THE THREAT 1: Bengali Nationalist Enterprise**

However, the problems of monopoly were not new within the industry in Calcutta. In fact, the accusations of monopoly predate the ICC and issues with distribution

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<sup>145</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 761

<sup>146</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 798

<sup>147</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 771

(mal)practices had surfaced in the beginning of the decade, within the fledgling industry in Calcutta, when people complained of Madan Theatres failing to provide adequate distribution to independent films. As discussed in Chapter 2, Ahindra Choudhury points out that their lone venture, *Soul of a Slave*, given up for distribution to the Madans in the early 1920s, was barely screened in theatres for a week or so and then the cans were relegated to dust. It was to counter this problem that the Russa Theatre was established by a group of Bengalis, including Aurora, as an independent cinema house. Significantly, the group decided to set up this new cinema not in the traditional Bengali entertainment district in north Calcutta, but in the emerging Bengali neighbourhood of Bhowanipur – a neighbourhood that was not yet taken over by Madan cinemas. Further south from Bhowanipur lay the area of Tollygunj, where Madan had set up his studio and Ahindra Choudhury had also leased land in the effort to construct a studio. Within a decade Tollygunj would become the centre of film production with the new studios of the sound era coming up in the area.

The first film screened in the Russa was *Bilet Pherat/ England Returned* (1921), the first feature film made by Bengali producers, Indo-British Film Company. This was soon followed by Aurora's first feature, *Ratnakar* (1921). That Aurora did not release the film at the Cornwallis Theatre, which was located off Beadon Street, in the Bengali theatre district in north Calcutta, is significant. A typical Bengali film, by Bengali producers, would have run to a full house for weeks in the Cornwallis, whereas Bhowanipur was far from north Calcutta and audiences, especially women, would not travel all the way there from north Calcutta to see the film. And, even though Bhowanipur was seeing a rapid insurgence of Bengali middle class families by the 1920s, these audiences could not sustain the film for a long run.

The Cornwallis was owned by the Madans, who were producing a number of Bengali films by 1921 – they were at this time the only regular producers of Bengali films in Calcutta. *Ratnakar* was produced by Aurora, a small company at this time, mainly involved in the travelling cinema business. It is likely that the rates and conditions

offered by the Madans for releasing the film in the key theatres in north Calcutta were too high for new film companies like Indo-British and Aurora. Starting a new cinema, in a new neighbourhood not controlled by the Madans was their strategy for survival.

As discussed in Chapter 2, *Bilet Pherat/ England Returned* was hyped up in the Calcutta journals, and social circles as an all-Bengali endeavour, made with Bengali capital and enterprise.<sup>148</sup> The nationalist tone of this rhetoric is unmistakable and echoes the *swadeshi* call - to manufacture local products for local consumption as a mark of protest against the colonial administration – except that this call was not against imperialist but capitalist forces. As discussed, local production by the independents could not meet the demand, and thus soon Russa was screening Madan productions. By the mid-1920s, the Madans had expanded into southern parts of Calcutta with at least one cinema, the Empress, in the vicinity.

## **COUNTERING THE THREAT 2: Presence of Distribution and Exhibition Chains for Foreign Films**

Moreover, the presence of distribution and exhibition chains, like the Globe's, offset the dominance of the Madans and also helped to counter the monopoly. Globe's Laharry was well aware of the threat through first-hand experience: he was, after all, a key member of D. G.'s Indo-British film company that had produced *Bilet Pherat/ England Returned*, a company that failed due to the inadequate circulation of its films. However, it was not easygoing for the other distribution chains. In the ICCE, Laharry speaks of “cutthroat competition” amongst film importers, alleging that large-scale importers, presumably the Madans (although they are not named), bought up the best pictures and therefore cornered the “American Market” and while other films were available, the smaller chains could not solely sustain exhibition without these big pictures.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Sen, “Diner Pore Din,” reprinted in Sugata Sinha, ed., *Jugopat* 2, no. 2 (2004): 35

<sup>149</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 762

However, when cross-questioned on the difficulty of accessing films by independent exhibitors Laharry's response is guarded:

“Q. Do you think the exhibitors have any difficulty in getting pictures in this country?

A. Not generally.

Q. Suppose they are not in your circuit, do they find much difficulty in running their shows?

A. They go to Universal's.”<sup>150</sup>

This cautious response appears to suggest that there was enough choice for exhibitors. The overall sense of ambiguity and elusiveness that marked these discussions, perhaps, leads the Committee to conclude that there was no monopoly but fair competition.

Thus, Madan Theatres' dominance was countered in two ways. The problem of acquiring foreign films was offset by the establishment of other distribution chains in an effort at creating a competitive market. And the lack of exhibition outlets for local productions was addressed by the fledgling local industry by securing direct ownership or control of cinema houses. Despite these efforts, however, the Madans continued to dominate circulation over the next few years. Globe's Laharry admits that he would venture into production only if he had control over key theatres in the major cities, to be able to ensure profits.<sup>151</sup> Laharry thus gestures towards a unique category that emerged within the Calcutta industry: the producer-exhibitor.<sup>152</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2, the Madans were the only vertically integrated company in Calcutta in the 1920s; however, the producer-exhibitor required less capital investment and ensured exhibition for home productions, while at the same time filling remaining screen space with a regular supply of second run foreign films, rented from existing distributors like Globe and Universal.

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<sup>150</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 777

<sup>151</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 782

<sup>152</sup> Bhaumik discusses another category prevalent in Bombay – the distributor-producer. Bhaumik, “Emergence,” 56

This practice was taken up at the micro level by Calcutta studios in the 1930s. While several Calcutta studios were moving towards vertical integration, as discussed above, NT had a direct but limited involvement with exhibition through the introduction of its cinema chain, Chitra, with theatres in Calcutta, as well as several key cities across India, like Benaras.<sup>153</sup> And even a small company like Kali Films sought to control exhibition in Calcutta in the 1930s by taking control of cinema houses like the Crown and the Cornwallis. This practice, I would argue, was adopted as a reaction to the monopolistic practices of the Madans. In effect these companies were trying to emulate within their modest means what the Madan Company practiced throughout its existence - controlling the business through vertical integration. However, as we will see in the following chapter, direct exhibition by the producer was soon to be supplemented by the rise of organised pan-Indian distribution for the local industry.

This inquiry into circulation, therefore, reveals a complex picture of the emergence of exhibition in Calcutta and of early circulation practices, not only drawing a distinction between the resolutely urban character of the cinema in Calcutta and the *mofussil* film culture in the rest of the Bengal, but also exposing several layers within the metropolitan film culture of Calcutta, including first run and second run cinemas and 'junk' prints that circulated through the lower rungs of the exhibition ladder. It brings out the involvement of local and transnational capital in circulation, especially Hollywood's direct involvement in exhibition, and further reiterates Madans' control over South Asian cinema. While the diffusion of the Madan monopoly opened up the production and exhibition sectors, it also allowed for more stable distribution to develop. And while the demise of Madan Theatres marked the retraction of the Calcutta industry's dominance within the subcontinent, it also paved the way for the new Calcutta studios of the sound era to make an impact across South Asia through distribution networks.

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<sup>153</sup> Y. A. Fazalbhoy, *The Indian Film: A Review* (Bombay: Bombay Radio Press, 1939), 116

## CHAPTER 4

### AURORA FILM CORPORATION

*“...The newness of Talkies is almost over, and consequently, the earnings are diminishing. Today, there is room only for pictures of some merits to earn enough and this we have to achieve at a curtailed cost. I know it is difficult, but it will be somewhat easier if sentiment is sacrificed at the Altar of Business....”<sup>1</sup>*

In 2009, Aurora Film Corporation formally celebrated its centenary.<sup>2</sup> As the only silent film organisation that has survived to tell its tale, in however fragmentary a manner, Aurora is a successful case of sound business logic within a volatile film industry. The studio has managed to stay in business with the help of a variety of strategies employed throughout its century long existence. The secret of its longevity has not been limited to concentrating on film production - as pointed out in Chapter 2 Aurora produced a few films through the 1920s, and no Bengali talkie in the 1930s despite having a sound studio; instead the strength of Aurora’s success comes from a continued stress on film circulation. In fact, as discussed in this chapter, distribution has been the key focus of Aurora’s business strategy.

Today Aurora identifies itself exclusively as a film company, whose only activity is the production, distribution and exhibition of film. Anjan Bose, the grandson of the company’s founder, Anadi Bose, uses this long association with film to differentiate his company from his ‘non-Bengali’ competitors. He argues that film is only one of several businesses that the other companies in Calcutta today are engaged in, whereas the sole business of his company over the last three generations has been in the cinema. Bose stresses that his family has been in the

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<sup>1</sup> Anadi Bose, in his Presidential address at the First conference of The Bengal Motion Picture Association, Faridpur, January 29, 1939.

<sup>2</sup> If one were to go by other sources Aurora should be celebrating it in 2011. See Mukherjee, *Bangla Chalachchitrer Itihas*, 53.

industry because of their love and understanding of the cinema business and this insider knowledge goes back a century, right to the early days of the industry in Calcutta.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter focuses on Aurora as a case study in order to take a closer look at the industry in Calcutta. It draws on documents unearthed in the files of Aurora to better understand circulation at ground level. I have looked at all documents in the Aurora cabinets that I could access, related to their feature film distribution activities until the late 1930s, however, quite understandably, I was not given access to financial records. The files included contracts and correspondence with producers, distributors and agents from across South Asia and beyond, along with requests for screenings from first-time cinemas in small towns. In addition I also came across censor certificates, receipts for publicity material etc. from distributors and agents.

This is the first such scrutiny into studio papers in the early decades of film in South Asia and the Aurora papers allow a rare insight into the complex structures and intricate associations that connected the film industries of India from the 1930s. Chapter 3 was a general study of circulation practice as it emerged in the city of Calcutta in the 1920s, based primarily on conversations within the ICCE. This detailed enquiry of the Aurora papers gives us a fragmented but deeper understanding of film circulation in 1930s India, as refracted through the workings of Aurora.

The Aurora papers reveal an elaborate network of circulation, by the early 1930s, stretching across South Asia with interactive relationships between the major centres of film and smaller stations. It becomes clear that Aurora was primarily a second run distributor in the key eastern circuit, including Calcutta, as well as across South Asia. The discussions in the ICCE in Chapter 3 pointed to the importance of continued circulation of film prints for the industry. The study of the Aurora papers in this chapter further reveals the stress the industry laid on the

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with Anjan Bose.

second run and the crucial role that the second run played in the sustenance of the industry.

In addition I also found a few lists of film prints held by Aurora. While these indicate the range of films held for circulation, sometimes the lists were of damaged films marked for destruction. The lists included both silent and talkies, but were not always easy to date, as the films were 'junk' prints and thus could have been held for years after the original production dates. Some of the lists were created in the 1940s, made for insurance claims after a fire destroyed Aurora's storage facilities, while others are dated in the 1950s. However, their presence suggests the continuity of circulation of junk prints well after they had been screened in first and second run cinemas, sometimes continuing for a couple of decades after their production date. The lists also suggest that Aurora was simultaneously engaged in multiple levels of circulation that cut across the several layers of the industry: thus, on the one hand, Aurora was distributing films by New Theatres and Ray, at the top end of the spectrum, while on the other hand it was engaged in the circulation of 'junk' films through its travelling cinemas.

In Chapter 3 the discussion on circulation of film in South Asia highlighted two key aspects. The first was the division of the territory of India into distinct geographical circuits – thus eastern (or Bengal), western (or Bombay) etc.. The second crucial distinction that became apparent was between the first and second run cinema theatres. Here, another feature that differentiates circulation practice in India needs to be discussed – that of the A, B and C circuits. The B and C circuits were addressed to more popular or *bazaar* audiences, while the A circuit was considered to be the respectable one.<sup>4</sup> It can be safely said that the genre of the social, and historical would more likely be considered for exhibition in the A circuit while the fantasy and stunt genres would fall within the B and C circuits.<sup>5</sup> Thus, among the NT films, *Devdas* and *Chandidas* would travel within the A circuit (through second run and beyond), while a film such as *Daku Monsoor*

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<sup>4</sup> The characterisation of this set of circuits are complex and the B and C circuits especially cannot always be distinguished. Further, their boundaries are not always watertight and films could travel from one category to the other.

<sup>5</sup> Rosie Thomas, "Still Magic: An Aladdin's Cave of 1950s B-Movie Fantasy," *Tasveerghar*, [http://www.tasveerghar.net/cmsdesk/essay/103/index\\_1.html](http://www.tasveerghar.net/cmsdesk/essay/103/index_1.html).

would likely be characterised as a B circuit film. Based on the film lists in the Aurora files it is apparent that Aurora was operating within all three circuits, further augmenting my argument that Aurora's involvement in circulation through the 1930s cut across all the multiple layers of the industry.

This chapter starts by drawing together a brief history of Aurora, from its inception as a travelling cinema company to the formation of the Corporation in 1929 that marked its entry into distribution. It then moves on to a discussion of the Aurora papers and Aurora's distribution activities in the eastern, southern and northern circuits, including the co-productions with Madras-based companies. Thereon the chapter moves to a detailed discussion of Aurora's work as a distributor for the major Bombay studio, Imperial. I came across several files of correspondence with Imperial, and these are the most complete of all the sets of documents that I have come across; even then there are several gaps. While I have gone through these files extensively, I have only engaged in a discussion of the distribution activities in the late silent era and then chosen to focus on the crucial moment of the coming of sound in 1931. As mentioned, Imperial won the race to release India's first sound feature film and the papers reveal the uncertainties and hesitations that surrounded the introduction of this new technology – a textured tale that is at odds with the triumphant narratives of the arrival of the talkie in India.

#### **4.1.1 FROM COMPANY TO CORPORATION**

Aurora is not only the oldest surviving film company in India but also the second feature film production company to be formed in Calcutta, after the Madans. Despite this long history, however, Aurora has not been given very much space in existing histories of 'Indian cinema'. One possible reason for this could be that it was not considered to be a top producer in the silent and early talkie period. However, its century long chronicle is dotted with associations with several memorable films and producers, most notably the celebrated Indian art house director, Satyajit Ray. Aurora was the first distributor of Ray's *Pather Panchali* in 1955 – a film that went on to become a classic in world cinema. Subsequently Aurora went on to produce several of Ray's films, as well as distribute them. A

few decades earlier Aurora also distributed the films of one of India's foremost studios, New Theatres Ltd. Today Bose narrates these associations with pride as the splendid achievements of his company's hundred-year existence.<sup>6</sup>

As discussed in Chapter 2, the Aurora Cinema Company started with a small unit of two or three people as a travelling cinema company in the early years of cinema in India. There are conflicting dates given for the birth of the organisation. According to Kalish Mukherjee, the idea of a film organisation was conceived of by Debi Ghosh, who travelled the countryside as a travelling film exhibitor along with Charu Ghosh. Anadi Bose initially came into the venture primarily as a financier, and formally joined the company only in 1912. However, while giving evidence to the ICC the Aurora team claims to be in existence from 1913.<sup>7</sup> While the date of its origin is contentious there is no doubt that it was one of the first few companies that were formally launched with the intention of venturing into the film business. Little is known about this period of Aurora's existence.

The entry into the film business on the part of the three initial entrepreneurs came from a tangential association with the culture industries. Debi Ghosh was involved in the photography business and was thus familiar with contemporary imaging technologies. Anadi Bose managed, and had part-ownership of, a Bengali Public Theatre company, Manmohan Theatre, and was thus clued into the intricacies of managing a cultural organisation. It seems most likely that Bose was a financier, and manager, whereas Debi Ghosh was the technical expert, given the background in photography.<sup>8</sup>

Around 1917-18 the company acquired a Williamson and a Prefect camera – Hiralal Sen's camera according to filmic folklore - and started dabbling in fiction film production. Their first feature film, *Ratnakar* (a mythological), was finally released on August 13, 1921, in Russa Theatre. Along with it a short 2-reeler was also released.

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with Anjan Bose.

<sup>7</sup> ICCE vol.2, 666.

<sup>8</sup> Little is known of Charu Ghosh.

Between 1921 and 1934 Aurora produced seven silent feature films. The travelling cinema business continued alongside. In the ICCE Aurora comes across primarily as a travelling cinema business rather than a producing concern. The Aurora team also claims to be directly importing films for exhibiting in their travelling cinemas.<sup>9</sup> My investigation into the extant files in the current offices of Aurora reveals that within a couple of years of this, however, Aurora was acting as a distributor rather than simply as an importer of films for direct exhibition. That is, by 1929 Aurora had started to supply films to exhibitors. This move into large-scale distribution coincides with the launch of the Aurora Cinema Corporation.

By 1932, when Barua declared bankruptcy and joined New Theatres, Aurora acquired P. C. Barua's studio and, by the mid 1930s, had converted it into a sound studio. However, they did not immediately launch into Bengali talkie production in their new studio; rather they focussed on producing Tamil and Telegu films, as discussed in Chapter 2, and also hired out their studios to other film companies for production. Their first Bengali talkie production was not until 1940.

Through all of this period Aurora rapidly expanded the distribution side of their business. In 1929 Anadi Bose launched a separate company to mark the entry into film distribution. The new company was named the **Aurora Film Corporation** and was floated in partnership with G. Ramaseshan as managing partner. It was to be involved in production, distribution, exhibition and in the "laboratory business".<sup>10</sup> This period marks a shift in Aurora's business strategy, paving the way for an organised and calculated entry into distribution. In the production chapter the question posed was what need there was for Bose to float a new company when the existing company was already involved in all of the functions mentioned above. The possibility suggested was that there may have been a split with Debi Ghosh who had been the key creative mind in Aurora. Here I pose another possibility for the creation of this new company: that Bose was setting his sights wider and looking to extend his business beyond the territory of Bengal.

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<sup>9</sup> ICCE Vol. 2, 666.

<sup>10</sup> Mukherjee, *Bangla Chalachitrer Itihas*, 55. Ahindra Choudhury's account also confirms that the company was formed in 1929. See Choudhury. *Nijere Haraye Khunji* vol. 2, 95.

The new company was geared to focus on distribution and exhibition of films, both within Bengal, as well as in other territories. The company acquired the distribution rights of the New Theatres films and I would argue that this was one of the reasons why Aurora did not produce Bengali talkies in the mid 1930s. They also acquired the rights for the eastern circuit for all silent films of the major Bombay film studio, Imperial and, post-1931, the rights for a few Imperial sound productions as well. In addition, Aurora continued to rent foreign films for distribution and exhibition.

Madras appears to have been viewed as a key sector by Aurora, as they incurred the cost of setting up a branch office there. This is where the significance of Ramaseshan's entry comes in. Ramaseshan may have had an impact on the choice of this location. He hailed from Madras, and the documents in the Aurora files, along with reports in the contemporary journals, suggest that he was a key figure in Aurora - instrumental in furthering the distribution business. The Madras branch was in operation certainly by early 1933 and functioned primarily as a distribution office. The travelling cinema business continued alongside, although it was no longer the sole exhibition outlet – Aurora also directly owned, or controlled cinemas, especially in the eastern circuit. It appears that the travelling cinema business continued sporadically into the 1960s, or even the 1970s.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, the new company was also involved in the production of multilingual films that were primarily for distribution in the other provinces. Through the 1930s Aurora produced several Tamil, Telegu and Hindi/Urdu films in conjunction with companies from the south of India and from Lahore, in the north. In contrast, Aurora's Bengali productions in the entire decade of the 1930s consisted of two silent films and a short 2-reel sound film, *Shibaratri* (1936). Their first full-length Bengali talkie, in 1940, was the sound version of one of the early Barua silent films, *Nishir Dak*, the rights to which they may have acquired when Aurora took over the assets of Barua's bankrupt concern. Renamed *Abhinaba*, the film was released in November 1940. Even in the 1940s there was a

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with Sadananda Ghosh, the oldest surviving employee of Aurora, working since 1951. Additional interview with Anjan Bose. December 2006.

feature production on an average only once every two years. Evidently, Bengali feature film production was not a priority with Aurora at this time. This lack of interest in Bengali film production can explain why Aurora is relegated to the sidelines when discussing the history of Bengali cinema, which is overshadowed by NT. However, there is a significant detail that needs to be pointed out here – that despite the fact that Aurora barely produced any Bengali films in the 1930s, Anadi Bose was elected the President of the Bengal Motion Picture Association (BMPA) in 1939. It is evident that Bose commanded a strong influence within the Bengal industry at the time.

This new trans-regional ambition discussed above perhaps explains the adoption of the more grandiose ‘Corporation’ as the name of the new company. The older production interest in short films, topical, newsreels and educational films for the government and corporate bodies, like the Tea Board, continued alongside. The two companies finally merged in 1945.<sup>12</sup>

The Madras office was a big step at expanding the business beyond the regional borders of the Bengal territory. Another related step was the production, or co-production, of multilingual films in Tamil and Telegu but also in Hindi/Urdu. One of Aurora’s most successful productions was *Tarzan ki Beti* (Daughter of Tarzan, 1938), a film that capitalised on the popularity of the Tarzan figure,<sup>13</sup> and had a successful run into the 1950s. But there seems to have been more to their extra-regional ambitions. International links were established in the 1930s – a facet that is discussed at length in the following chapter.

Additionally, Aurora had interests in exhibition as well. In the early 1930s the company directly owned a couple of cinema theatres in Bengal and had part control of several more cinemas in Calcutta and across the Bengal territory,<sup>14</sup> and this aided in the furthering of their distribution interests. The Aurora papers reveal that, within Calcutta, Aurora was a regular supplier of films to the Pearl Cinema

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<sup>12</sup> Mukherjee, *Bangla Chalachchitrer Itihas*, 55.

<sup>13</sup> This was a year after the first of the Tarzan films made in India, *Toofani Tarzan*, was released in Bombay.

<sup>14</sup> B. Bharucha, *Indian Cinematograph Year Book*, 1938 (Bombay: Motion Picture Society of India, 1939).

(in central Calcutta, off Chowringhee Road) and Howrah Cinema (in the satellite town of Howrah, across the river). The owner of Pearl, Mrs. Sorabjee, and Aurora appear to be business partners, although the details of the partnership are not available. This was a mutually beneficial relationship as it offered Aurora a regular screening space in Calcutta and lent its distribution claims weight, whereas the cinema was assured of regular access to films.

While distribution was its mainstay in the 1930s, Aurora was also trying to spread its risks and expand into all sectors of the cinema business, although cautiously, and within a limited scope. As veteran Bengali actor Haridhan Mukherjee says, “They never over-reached themselves.”<sup>15</sup> In this business model Aurora was perhaps looking to the Hollywood studios or, closer to home, taking a leaf out of the Madan Company, who were competitors until the early 1930s. Aurora’s story is one of pragmatic expansion and sound business logic that rings beyond the overtly sentimental story of NT, or the palpably ambitious sweep of the story of the Madan Company. Traces of the pragmatism that ruled the organisation is also evident in Anadi Bose’s presidential speech at the inaugural session of the BMPA in 1939, quoted at the start of this chapter. In effect Aurora’s rise occurred with the fall of the Madans, as did NT’s rise and that of many others in the city. As discussed in Chapter 2 the weakening of the Madan Company’s grip over the industry in Calcutta created a vacuum and spawned many film companies, and Aurora was one of the key companies to take advantage of this void.

#### **4.1.2 AURORA IN THE ICCE: 1920s**

In the deposition to the ICC Aurora identifies itself as “Cinematograph Exhibitors and Producers and Renters of Indian Subject films.”<sup>16</sup> The primary emphasis of their exhibition work in 1927 appears to be in travelling cinemas which, judging by the discussion in the ICCE, does not seem to be very big. The Aurora team insists that while they also exhibit in hired spaces, or “pavilions” in Calcutta, they

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<sup>15</sup> Aurora Borealis, *The Statesman*, January 9, 1984.

<sup>16</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 663.

are primarily a travelling cinema company, touring villages and tea estates in Bengal and Assam.<sup>17</sup>

Interestingly, the discussion on the nitty-gritty of the travelling cinema business is conducted in general terms, rather than the specifics of Aurora's business, leaving the facts unclear. For instance:

“Q. In the course of a year how many times does one particular outfit return to the same village.

A. Generally they come back once in a year. They show the same film in every village.

Q. It does not give a very extended market to the Indian industry?

A. If a touring company visits a village only once in a year it requires only one programme....”<sup>18</sup>

Does this discussion indicate that Aurora visits a village only once a year? Or does it mean that this is the general practice of itinerant exhibition at the time? That is not very clear. This tendency to speak in the general rather than the particular is indicative of the type of caution exercised by the industry as a whole while discussing its internal workings, possibly because the witnesses did not wish to divulge earnings. It is also an effort to ward off perceived intervention by the colonial government.

The quote above also suggests that the programme was not extensive; instead by visiting a large number of villages and communities with their limited programme, touring companies like Aurora were able to conduct business by investing a small amount of money to rent a limited package of films. They maximised returns on this limited investment by screening the same programme in multiple locations, thereby increasing the shelf life of the films that they were screening – a practice that Mahadevan characterises as revivification.<sup>19</sup> As argued in Chapter 3 travelling cinemas were a more economical way of conducting business by fairly small companies given the limited availability of investments in the Bengal circuit as compared to Bombay.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 666.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 672-3

<sup>19</sup> Mahadevan, “Traffic in Technologies”

Aurora's travelling cinema business continued for several decades. The film programme in the 1920s was largely made up of foreign films that Aurora imported or rented from other distributors along with the few Bengali films they had made (by 1927 Aurora had released four films). One assumes here that Aurora was one of the travelling cinemas renting 'junk' films, referred to by Laharry in Chapter 3. The ICCE deposition also indicates that Aurora directly imported films; however they state very clearly that at this time the films were used for their own exhibition purposes and not rented to other travelling cinema companies.<sup>20</sup>

Aurora's own productions were, unsurprisingly, shown in the Russa Theatre in Bhowanipore, and sometimes also in the Star Theatre, on Beadon Street,<sup>21</sup> hiring the Star on days that the stage performance was not on, or when the theatre group was out touring other parts of Bengal. As indicated in Chapter 1, *jatra* companies and theatre groups also toured other cities and small towns on invitation, and the cinema was following in a similar tradition. However, the cinema was able to attract a wider audience than that commanded by the theatre, as travelling cinema shows were able to reach working class audiences in villages and industrial towns with more ease and regularity than travelling theatre groups.

In addition, Aurora rented out their own productions to other touring cinema companies. This means that in 1927 they were not quite distributors in the true sense of the term. The scenario was to change very quickly within the next two years. My study of the Aurora documents suggests that by 1930 they were full-fledged distributors of both Indian and foreign films.

#### **4.2.1 DISTRIBUTORS IN THE EASTERN TERRITORY: AURORA and NEW THEATRES**

As discussed in Chapter 2, New Theatres grew into one of India's premier studios in the 1930s. As NT's distributor some of this credit must go to Aurora. Aurora was responsible for distributing the NT films starting with its first film. The

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<sup>20</sup> ICCE vol. 2, 666 – 668.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 667.

relationship between NT's B. N. Sircar and Aurora is rather interesting. It starts in 1931 with Aurora acquiring the distribution rights for NT's first film, *Chashar Meye* (Farmer's Daughter, 1931). Looking back on the industry in Calcutta at the time it was perhaps quite natural for NT to approach Aurora for distribution of their film. Aurora was a long-standing Bengali-owned film business in Calcutta, with experience in the workings of the industry, while all the other experienced companies were controlled by 'non-Bengali' businessmen - Parsis and Marwaris. Aurora, on the other hand, was perceived as a pro-Bengali unit right from the days when the first independent Bengali films were distributed and exhibited in the early 1920s. As discussed in Chapter 3, Aurora had helped to set up Russa Theatre in 1921 as an alternative exhibition space for independent producers who were being put out of competition by the Madans' monopolistic practices. And thus, by the early 1930s, Aurora already had a working relationship with other producers in Calcutta.

We are fortunate that several letters and contracts outlining the terms of distribution have remained in Aurora's records. The terms of the contract between Aurora and NT unravels through continuing correspondence, the first of which is from August 1931. In a letter dated August 22, NT offers Aurora the distribution rights "to all places outside the municipal limits of Calcutta."<sup>22</sup> The follow-up letter from Aurora two days later is an amendment of this clause: the distribution rights also include all south Calcutta theatres like Purna Theatre (formerly Russa) and Park Show House "after the completion of the FIRST RUN exhibition at CHITRA."<sup>23</sup> [Emphasis Original] Chitra was owned by NT, and it is significant that NT's initial demand of having a monopoly over the exhibition of their films within Calcutta is overrun by Aurora, and NT only retains control over the exhibition of the film until the first run is completed.

Further, the amendment of the clause also reminds us of the significance of the location of exhibition sites within the city, specifically referring to theatres in the southern part of the city. As discussed in the previous chapter, theatres in north

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<sup>22</sup> Letter from B. N. Sircar of New Theatres to Aurora, August 22, 1931, found in the studio records of the Aurora Film Corporation.

<sup>23</sup> Letter from Aurora to NT, August 24, 1931.

Calcutta were strategically more important for Bengali audiences than those in the southern parts; however, given that south Calcutta was steadily gaining in importance by the 1930s Aurora's acquisition of exhibition rights in south Calcutta cinemas would have been a crucial gain.

Clause 2 takes this further:

“...we can take bookings in any of the Cinemas in Calcutta, including the North of Calcutta, after the completion of the SECOND RUN exhibition at CHITRA.”<sup>24</sup> [Emphasis Original]

B. N. Sircar was the son of the Attorney General, and was himself a qualified architect. Socially, he and his new cinema business wielded considerable influence. As mentioned in the previous chapter, NT's showcase theatre, Chitra, was inaugurated with much fanfare by the nationalist leader Subhas Chandra Bose. Sircar was also widely reputed to be a strong-willed personality. That Aurora manages to negotiate the distribution rights for **all of Calcutta**, including the most lucrative north Calcutta district, despite NT's position speaks volumes of Aurora's business skills and the clout they held even at this early stage of their involvement in distribution.

Another significant fact emerges from these two documents. The letter is addressed not to Aurora but to Calcutta Pictures Corporation, at the same address as Aurora. It is quite possible that Aurora formed this entity as a separate company for the distribution of the Calcutta films. By 1933 however the correspondence continues with Aurora. Thereon, Aurora continued to distribute all NT films in Bengal and across the territory of India, including the Bombay and Madras circuits, as discussed below.

#### **4.2.2 RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER CALCUTTA PRODUCERS**

As mentioned in Chapter 2 there were two phases of growth in production houses in Calcutta – one in the late 1920s, which came to an abrupt halt with the coming of sound; the second spurt was around the mid 1930s coinciding with the fall of

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

the Madans, when more and more personnel found themselves out of work. As argued this phenomenon was also given a boost with the entry of businessmen who were willing to inject cash into the industry. Unlike the earlier phase the growth in the mid 1930s was marked by the rise of studios, although smaller companies also existed alongside. The key studios from this period, apart from the iconic NT, were Bharat Lakshmi Pictures (hereafter BLP), Radha Film Company and East India Films.

Aurora appears to have been involved in the distribution of films produced by all these major Calcutta studios at some time or the other in the 1930s, with the exception of East India Films. Aurora also had contracts with some of the smaller production companies, like Kali Films and Prima Films.<sup>25</sup> Yet, Aurora's name does not figure very much in the Bengali Film Directory. This discrepancy is possibly because Aurora was working as a second run distributor for many of these films, in a manner similar to their relationship with NT. Like NT, most of these producers owned or managed at least one cinema theatre in the city, as discussed in Chapter 3, and thus the first run of the films would be in their own cinemas. The tie-up with Aurora allowed the producers access to a wider market across the city, and the territory. That would add an exciting twist to this tale: Anadi Bose becomes an important player within the Calcutta industry not through his role as a first run distributor for major Calcutta producers but by employing a variegated business strategy that gave him access to different layers of the market and allowed him to control the second and subsequent rungs – both within Bengal and outside the territory. Chapter 3 has already argued for the importance of these secondary layers for the sustenance and stability of the industry. Aurora's, and Anadi Bose's, importance is additional proof of how much the industry valued this less visible aspect of the industry.

Further, the nature of Aurora's relationship with each of these companies varied, as did the territories marked out for distribution. For instance, with BLP, the distribution rights only seem to have been for the southern territory without any

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<sup>25</sup> Aurora was not the only distributor in this period. See Nandan Directory.

mention of the eastern circuit, whereas with smaller companies like Kali Films, Aurora had rights for the entire eastern circuit.

In general, there has been little evidence offered as regards to distribution of films in India; as a result, this segment remains bathed in obscurity, and has led to the assumption that the industry is fairly disorganised. Yet the Aurora papers show carefully worked out contracts and clauses that complicates this notion. These different relationships also give us an insight into the close links that these companies had with each other and the importance of the local network in the development of distribution at the time. This explains why Aurora was a major player in the Bengal film industry and why Anadi Bose was elected the President of the BMPA in 1939 despite the respectability and social standing that NT's Sircar commanded. The fact was that, as the distributor of NT's films, as well as the distributor for other Bengali productions, Aurora wielded significant control over the film industry in Calcutta and was thus crucial to the success or failure of the majority of the films produced in Calcutta. By the 1930s the Calcutta industry had well learnt the importance of a good distribution system thanks to the monopoly of the Madans over circulation through the 1920s.

An exchange of letters with Kali Films' proprietor, P. N. Ganguly, sheds further light on Aurora's business tactics. Kali was a small company and P. N. Ganguly was an old hand in the industry: his name comes up in the filmography from the silent era in association with the Madans. By 1935, Ganguly had control of the two oldest cinemas in the crucial north Calcutta district: the Crown and Cornwallis, renamed Sree and Uttara after Ganguly took over the lease from the Madans. As discussed above, the north Calcutta cinemas were the most significant group of cinemas for the release of Bengali films.

There is some correspondence between the two companies regarding the distribution of two films. Aurora does not appear to be interested in distributing Kali's films. Ganguly, on the other hand, tries to pressurise Aurora to distribute his films by threatening to sell them off to another buyer. Whether or not that buyer existed can be questioned as no specific name is given. Anadi Bose refuses to give in to this arm-wrangling and, in a very strongly worded letter, Bose makes

it very clear that he is not interested in distributing the films of smaller companies who are unable to supply films regularly for exhibition.<sup>26</sup>

Several things come to the fore with this set of letters. First, Aurora was interested in bulk booking films from a single producer. As discussed in Chapter 3 the problem of paucity of films is a pressing concern for distributors and exhibitors in the ICCE. Indian films appear to be very much in demand but people in the industry complain that not enough are being produced. Ten years on the problem is slightly different – many films are being produced in local languages but a regular supply is essential to maintain a regular exhibition business. Bose's letter makes it clear that given Aurora's large distribution net and the need to sustain a recurring supply to their exhibitors, he preferred long-term business deals with producers who could assure a regular stream of films.

Secondly, the producer, Kali, borrowed money from Aurora with the film as security but a misunderstanding arises regarding this. Ganguly alleges that the money was borrowed on the understanding that Aurora would distribute the film.

Bose's letter tries to clarify the situation: Aurora had merely lent money to Kali against an assurance and this money allowed Kali to complete the film. According to Bose, Aurora did not give out any guarantees for distribution. As Ganguly was unable to return the money borrowed, the rights for the film transferred to Bose, as payment for the money lent.

Ganguly tries to use the situation to his advantage by trying to get Bose to agree to distribute his film without returning the money borrowed. This would be doubly beneficial – he would not have to return the sum borrowed and he would be assured of the distribution of his film by accessing what looked like Aurora's superior distribution network. Bose strongly refutes this: there was no advantage in securing a distribution arrangement with Kali simply because he would not be assured of a regular supply of films, he says.

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<sup>26</sup> Letters between Aurora and Kali Films, January – March 1938.

This exchange of letters also points to a complex layered industry by this time – a structure that is not readily visible from the outside. For instance, the letters indicate that the producer of one of the films in question, *Reshmi Rumal*, is Dinu Films. This is corroborated by the entry in the Nandan film directory. However, all the correspondence for the film is handled by Kali Films. Does this mean that Dinu Films is a subsidiary of Kali Films, or did it approach Kali for production facilities and to handle distribution? So was Kali acting like an agent? In the absence of any direct evidence we can only hazard a guess, but these multiple names and companies crop up too often for us to disregard.

#### **4.3 NATIONAL AMBITIONS: THE MADRAS OFFICE**

Aurora's network in Madras is an important element of their story. Aurora established a branch office in Madras for distribution of films in the southern circuit. The earliest reference to the Madras office in the Aurora files dates back to early 1933 and the documents suggest that it continued to be functional into the 1940s, at the very least. From January 1933 Aurora was also distributing films rented from a Madras company in the eastern circuit. This association is strengthened by the end of 1933 through co-productions in the southern Indian languages of Tamil and Telegu. The Madras office handled distribution for several Calcutta studios (including NT, BLP and Radha) as well as the foreign films to which Aurora owned distribution rights for the entire territory of India. By the late 1930s Aurora was also distributing films for northern Indian producers in the southern territory.

Silent film production in Madras, the key centre of film in southern India, had seen a big boost from 1930. As elsewhere the coming of the talkies dealt a sudden blow to this growth. As a result Madras producers looked to Bombay and Calcutta, the two major film production centres with sound-capable studios, for talkie production in Tamil and Telegu. By this time Aurora had taken control of Barua's studio and converted it into a sound studio, and they took advantage of this new window of opportunity to hire out its studios to production units from Madras. Eventually, Aurora went on to co-produce several films in Tamil and Telegu.

Aurora opened an office in Madras from early 1933 to strengthen its distribution prospects in the southern territories. For distribution purposes the Madras territory included all of southern India and Ceylon. Contracts and other documents found in the Aurora files suggest that Aurora's distribution net in the southern circuit was cast wide and included the key cities of Madras, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Vizagapatam, Mysore, Calicut and Cochin. The Madras Branch office of Aurora was clearly a highlight and was advertised prominently on the official letterhead.

However, the first reference to Aurora's distribution in the Madras circuit is in 1931. It relates to the distribution rights of NT's first film, suggesting that the opening of the branch office followed initial forays at distribution in the southern circuit. The first Tamil talkie distributed in the circuit was also a NT film, *Nandanar*, released by Aurora in Madras on April 14, 1933. Apart from distributing NT films, by the mid 1930s the Madras office was also distributing films produced by the other major Calcutta studios, including BLP and Radha. The contracts are specifically for the distribution of Tamil, Telegu and Hindi/Urdu films produced by these Calcutta studios. Further contracts with NT confirm that Aurora had acquired rights for all NT films in the Madras circuit,<sup>27</sup> thereby suggesting that Aurora was also distributing NT's Hindi/Urdu films in Madras. Aurora also held distribution rights in India and Burma for several foreign films and newsreels, including films by Columbia Talkies. An Aurora letterhead from 1932 uses the Columbia logo and advertises Aurora as distributors of Columbia Talkies. In addition Aurora also produced several information films for the government and presumably these were also sent along for screening in the Madras cinemas. These documents thus suggest that the Madras office was handling a fair amount of Aurora's distribution business.

An interesting facet comes to the fore in Aurora's NT files. Despite having a direct presence in the southern circuit, Aurora also used sub-agents to further distribution. A contract drawn in December 1936 suggests that an Aurora associate in the southern territory, K. A Davies, had the distribution rights to the

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<sup>27</sup> Contract with NT, March 10, 1933.

NT films, *Mirabai* (1933, Bengali) and its Hindi remake, *Rajrani Mira* (1933), for a limited period. Davies further sub-leased the film for part of the territory to another local distributor. These letters thus point to an intricate set of associations between agents and local sub-agents in the efforts at gaining maximum returns for a film. Aurora, which owned the distribution rights, in turn made use of local distributors in the southern circuit. And thus the chain continued.

Aurora also started to distribute films made by BLP in the Madras territory from mid 1935.<sup>28</sup> The contract started from August 1, 1935, for a period of one year and was extended for a further year in June 1936.<sup>29</sup> The relationship seems to continue into the 1940s as a letter from Aurora on July 15, 1939 confirms the extension for another two years.

However, this was not BLP's first entry into Madras. BLP had previously contracted Empire Talkie Distributors, Karachi, for the distribution of their films in the Madras Circuit. BLP, which by 1936 had prefixed Shree to its name, announced itself as "Producers of High Class Talkies in all Vernaculars" on its letterhead. Why did BLP switch from Empire Talkies to Aurora? Was it simply to do with the fact that the Aurora operation was run from Calcutta and BLP felt that therefore it was easier to deal with Aurora? And/or was Aurora offering better terms for business? Or was Aurora more successful in its distribution business in Madras and the southern territories than Empire Talkies? These questions would perhaps be best answered by looking into any existing documents in Madras and/or BLP files, if any exist.

Aurora was also distributing the film *Radhe Shyam*, produced by Kamla Movietone, Lahore. A letter dated March 19, 1936, says that Aurora would use their copy, which was presumably for use in the eastern circuit, for distribution in Madras. Aurora asked Kamla for a hundred posters for publicity suggesting that by this time their distribution net in the Madras territory was substantially widespread. That several producers were approaching Aurora for distribution also

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<sup>28</sup> Letters between BLP and Aurora, June and July 1935.

<sup>29</sup> Letter from Aurora, June 25, 1936.

indicates that by this time Aurora was widely known as a distributor in the Madras circuit.

#### 4.3.1 AURORA AND EFS

The association with Madras was not uni-directional. Aurora was also distributing films for Madras producers. This relationship reveals an entirely new aspect to distribution in the 1930s – the importance of inter-regional networks in the furtherance of film circulation within South Asia.

The largest association with a Madras producer and distributor at this time was with the Exhibitors Film Services Ltd., Madras (hereafter, EFS). This was an important group in Madras, and Aurora was acting as its eastern agent. EFS announces itself on its letterhead as:

“Machine & Motion Picture Supplies  
Laboratory, Studio,  
16 M. M. Films,  
Portable Talkies.”<sup>30</sup>

Much of Aurora’s correspondence is with A. Narayanan from EFS. Narayanan was a dynamic young film entrepreneur and one of the key figures in the Madras film industry.<sup>31</sup>

The arrangement between Aurora and EFS was in place at least from early 1933, if not earlier, and appears to be both for the eastern circuit as well as the northern. Letters from January 1933 reveal that Aurora was renting foreign films from EFS and getting bookings for screenings in Lucknow, in the northern circuit as well as in Shillong and Jamshedpur, both in the eastern circuit. Usually these films were screened for three days at one exhibition site, the norm in smaller stations, and then despatched to the next *mofussil* town for exhibition.

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<sup>30</sup> Like most film companies of this period EFS also dealt with import and sale of cinematographic equipment. This is a continuation of the sole agent phenomena discussed by Mahadevan and referred to above.

<sup>31</sup> EIC, 161; <http://www.upperstall.com/people/a-narayanan>. Narayanan made a number of films in the late 1920s until his untimely death in 1939 and reportedly assisted Robert Flaherty in making *The Elephant Boy* (1937). According to EIC, Narayanan worked in film distribution for K. D. Bros. in Bombay and also owned a cinema in Calcutta in 1922. He went to great lengths to find an American market for Indian films like *Sacrifice* (1927) and Imperial’s *Anarkali* (1928).

A letter dated January 3, 1933, brings out two specific details. Firstly the films were exhibited as a package of four films that included a 4-reel and a 2-reel comedy, a 1-reel cartoon and a Pathé Gazette, recalling the prevalent practice of block booking. Aurora is explicitly requested by EFS not to show the films separately but in the package that is rented out. For publicity of this complete programme EFS promises to send posters of Charlie Chaplin, thus suggesting that the main draw in this package was the 4-reeler, *Marie's Millions* (1929), a Chaplin film from Keystone.<sup>32</sup> This film programme, that included a mix of short films from different genres to attract a wide audience, harks back to the earliest days of film exhibition. EFS was confident that audiences would welcome this programme of short films as they were not yet spoiled for choice of feature length films. As we will see a little later this assumption on the part of EFS proves to be misguided.

Secondly, the films were to be sent to Aurora from a company in Bombay, which indicates that EFS also had agents in Bombay. This detail points to a countrywide network of film circulation in existence in the early 1930s, necessitated by the limited number of prints available for circulation in a vast geographical territory. Thus the Madras based company, which is importing foreign films, does not restrict its distribution only to the southern parts of the country. It ties up with other distributors in Bombay and Calcutta in order to extend the circulation of their films beyond their immediate market. Distributors in Bombay and Calcutta in turn use their agents and sub-agents to distribute the films in smaller locations across the territory. Provincial boundaries and limitations are overcome by developing a connection with distributors located in other circuits and by tapping into their local networks. This results in films crisscrossing across the country, aided by a well-developed railway network that provided easy access between metropolises and to *mofussil* towns located away from the metropolises. The metropolitan centres - Calcutta, Madras, Bombay - were also key port cities located on major global trade routes.

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<sup>32</sup> For more details on the film see <http://ftvdb.bfi.org.uk/sift/title/543104>.

A wide circulation of films was thus achieved by tapping into national, provincial and local networks with the help of infrastructural systems that were in place by this time. The conceptual binary of the centre and the periphery is rendered meaningless in this case by examining these networks of circulation: there is no one centre (Bombay) from which film emanates and, based on this evidence, cities like Calcutta and Madras cannot be considered peripheries. Or, in other words, the evidence from the Aurora papers challenges the conceptual categories of national and regional. And the films move not just in one direction: films directly imported into the port cities of Bombay, Madras and Calcutta also find their way into the other centres through the reciprocal use of these networks as seen in this chapter. Thus any understanding of film in India has to be developed with a multi-centred approach and cannot be based on a national model with one core centre, as has been the rationale for the study of ‘Indian cinema’. The Aurora papers reveal that this was certainly not the case in the first few decades of film in India.

As per distribution practices, publicity posters of Charlie Chaplin were to be sent by the main distributor, in this case E.F.S. The letter of January 3, 1933, also states that the “necessary wordings” need to be printed and sent across by them. However, a letter from February 6 says that the wordings were not “pasted” due to lack of time – a clear reference to the common practice of silent films where translations of the inter-titles in local languages, often in multiple languages, were inserted or “pasted” on the film.

The letters indicate that this relationship did not start off on a promising note. The posters were promised for despatch on January 6; however a letter from Aurora on February 4 complained that the posters had not yet been received. The films were finally booked in a theatre in Shillong, north-east India, in mid-February, but the screening ran into a problem as the censor certificates were not sent alongside. The screening was not successful, which is quite surprising as this was a Chaplin film. Aurora’s letter of February 28 says,

“...the sale was not much as expected. The picture was not much appreciated by the public. The total sale was only below 270/- for three days and we have made the minimum guarantee bill of Rs. 75/.”

It is clear that there is a variance in expectations between the two sides. In a letter on February 15, EFS writes,

“...Before you supply this picture to any small outstations, we shall thank you to have this released at Calcutta City and also at Rangoon for decent hire.”

Clearly, the company had higher ambitions from Aurora and was keen to get the film exhibited in the two major profit centres of Calcutta and Rangoon rather than smaller towns. As discussed in the previous chapter Calcutta and Rangoon were the two highest paying centres for exhibitors in the eastern circuit. Despite this Aurora writes back that their next booking was for Lucknow and a possible screening in the steel town of Jamshedpur. By March 13, Aurora informs EFS of the screening of the film in a Calcutta suburb where the film failed to make the minimum guarantee amount of Rs. 40 over two days. The film, writes Aurora, “is not even appealing to any class of audience and as such it is very difficult for us to get a booking in Calcutta.” It is possible that Aurora was testing out the market in Calcutta by showing the film in the *mofussil* before showing it within the city. As the film did not do well in the satellite station Aurora was not keen on further business with the film and were happy to return it. EFS then approached an agent in Delhi for further exhibition. Clearly, EFS had prepared this programme of short films in keeping with earlier film exhibition practices, however their hopes were not realised, as audiences in the eastern circuit did not appear to be drawn to the programme.

Correspondence continued between EFS and Aurora regarding other films, *Grandma's Boy* (1922, Harold Lloyd) and *Bachelors' Club* (1929, Richard Talmadge) as well as the serials, *King of the Wild* (1931) and *Mark of the Frog* (1928).<sup>33</sup> The correspondence indicates that films like these were primarily sold to agents by making use of star power. That the star system was actively drawn on by the industry is also apparent by another example: in a letter addressed to Aurora on August 31, 1933, Narayanan writes that they do not have any posters for the film *Grandma's Boy* to send along for publicising the film in Burma. He

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<sup>33</sup>This was a silent film which is now lost.

requests Aurora to source posters of Harold Lloyd from Calcutta and to send them to Burma. *Grandma's Boy* was a classic film; however this request for random posters of Harold Lloyd, without particular reference to the film, implies that the star persona was considered to be sufficient to advertise the film.

A hand written note on this letter, possibly by Ramaseshan, drew my attention. It asks one of the studio hands to “try for these at United Artistes or Madans,” indicating that United Artistes had a direct agent in Calcutta - another indication of how closely Hollywood was entwined within the film industry in Calcutta in these decades.

The letters also suggest that the routes by which these films travelled were not necessarily fixed. The primary distributor who imported or acquired the rights for the film had a range of contacts and tried to pitch the film wherever they saw the possibility of getting the most business. In case the film failed to get returns from the agents the primary distributor contacted another agent, usually in a different circuit, and tried to get business from there. There was no regular path that these films traversed; what was of primary importance to the distributor was to ensure an extended circulation for them. Needless to say these films were in all probability worn out prints at the very least, if not yet ‘junk’ film. A letter from EFS on May 4, 1933 confirms this. The condition of the print of the serial, *King of the Wild*, which was sent to Rangoon was so bad that EFS decided to withdraw it from circulation.

Further correspondence continued in May, June and July 1933, between the two companies, on films and details for exhibition in Rangoon. Some of the films that were being discussed also included Indian films, eg. *Lanka Dahan* (1933, Hindi) and *Garuda Garva Bangam* (1930).<sup>34</sup> The latter is a silent film made by Narayanan while the first film is most likely the Hindi version produced by Krishna Film Company in Bombay.<sup>35</sup> Two other films produced by Narayanan's General Pictures Corporation also come up for distribution in Rangoon:

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<sup>34</sup> Letter from EFS, May 4, 1933.

<sup>35</sup> A Telegu sound film of the same name was made in 1936 by Radha, and distributed by Aurora. See Censor Certificate No. 16663, June 2, 1936.

*Viswamitra* (*Rajrishi Vishwamitra*, 1931?)<sup>36</sup> and *Maya Madhusudan* (1931), both mythologicals.<sup>37 38</sup>

The letter from Aurora regarding *Maya Madhusudan* also instructs EFS for “Tamil and Telegu titles as without this it will not be of any use to them.”<sup>39</sup> This points to the presence of Tamil and Telegu audiences in Rangoon and explains the sudden interest on the part of Aurora in distributing these films in Rangoon. It may also partially explain Aurora’s involvement in Tamil and Telegu sound productions as Aurora could also exploit them in so-called peripheral markets like Burma, which was in its territory.

#### **4.3.2 AURORA CO-PRODUCTIONS FOR MADRAS**

As mentioned, the Aurora studio was perfectly poised to come to the aid of Madras producers seeking talkie production facilities and during the decade Aurora concentrated on acting as producers for Tamil and Telegu talkies.

Aurora’s first Tamil production was *Sakkubai* (1934, sound). This was also Aurora’s first sound film. An MOU dated December 6, 1933, lays out the terms and conditions of the production of the film. The agreement between Aurora and travelling cinema owner, Kunhappu A. Davies of Trichur and Cochin (districts in the present day southern Indian state of Kerala), confirms that the film was produced by Aurora in their studio in Calcutta. Davies gave Rs. 10,000 to Aurora for the production of the film. As customary, Aurora was to be responsible for the publicity of the film, with the expenses to be recovered from returns of the film. In return Davies would receive one copy of the film to show in his travelling cinema in the southern states. In addition Davies retained the right to hire out his copy to another exhibitor. Aurora was to get 10 percent of the returns across India and the rest would first pay for costs, and any resulting profits were to be shared equally by both parties.

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<sup>36</sup> Letter from EFS, May 4, 1933.

<sup>37</sup> Letter from Aurora, May 31, 1933.

<sup>38</sup> Details of producer and dates of all these films are from Rangoonwala, *Indian Films Index*.

<sup>39</sup> Letter From Aurora, May 31, 1933.

By January 1934 Narayanan writes to Aurora, to indicate his interest in buying out Aurora's 50 percent share in *Sakkubai*. Notably, the *Sakkubai* letters are on Narayanan's personal letterhead, not on the EFS letterhead, suggesting that Narayanan was going to be involved in this transaction not as a member of EFS, but in his personal capacity.

In a letter dated January 15, 1934, Narayanan offers Aurora Rs. 12,500 for the share of the film. Aurora's Ramaseshan on the other hand sends a telegram and a letter, on the same date offering the rights of *Sakkubai* for Rs. 15,000 in cash for the full amount to be paid immediately. Further, the telegram says, "offer open three days no counter proposals". In a follow-up letter on the 19<sup>th</sup> Ramaseshan responds to Narayanan's offer saying that Anadi Bose is not interested in changing the offer.

I have not come across any further letters on this in the Aurora files; however the files have a censor certificate (No 1727, Madras Board of Film Censors) for the film dated March 27, 1934, where Aurora Film Corporation Madras, is credited under the heading "produced or released by". We can assume that Narayanan's offer fell through and Aurora retained the rights for the film. It is entirely possible that Aurora did not want to give up the rights at all and thus asked for immediate cash payment in the knowledge that it would be difficult for Narayanan to pay up: an indication of how keen Aurora was to retain the rights for their southern production, and their confidence in being able to exploit the film.

Apart from *Sakkubai*, Aurora co-produced several Tamil and Telegu films through the 1930s. A few censor certificates date from the late 1930s suggesting the productions continued through the decade (see Chapter 2 for details). Given the presence of a handful of receipts from exhibitors addressed to the Madras office of Aurora, it can be claimed with a fair degree of certainty that the Madras office continued to function until the 1940s. The fact that the Tamil and Telegu films were recensored in the 1940s is also a good indication of the continuation of this relationship.

Ramaseshan, one of the key figures in the initiation of its distribution activity, relocated to Madras in 1936. In a public letter published in the widely circulated bilingual trade journal, *Dipali*, he writes,

“...I have done my duty and I leave my firm and the Industry in a prosperous condition and ... my own province, Madras, needs badly men of my type and she is welcoming me with open arms.”<sup>40</sup>

Ramaseshan's departure is at a time when Madras re-emerges as a production centre, with sound production facilities and this may have been one reason that prompted his move. As discussed in Chapter 2 several technical and creative talent were emigrating to Madras in the mid 1930s including groups from East India Films. It is not known if Ramaseshan continued to work with Aurora in Madras but his exit does not end Aurora's production and distribution relationship with Madras.<sup>41</sup> Along with the co-productions a handful of distribution letters also suggest that this relationship continued into the 1940s. A contract dated March 12, 1947, on the distribution of the Telegu film *Vipranarayana* (1937) to a cinema in 'Vizagapatam', a coastal city in Southern India, confirms Aurora's continued presence in the southern circuit.

#### 4.4 DISTRIBUTORS FOR NORTHERN STUDIOS

Even by the early 1930s, Aurora appears to be on the radar nationwide as a key distributor for the eastern territories. The letters suggest that while distribution territories were fairly well marked by this time there was continual inter-territorial business and activity taking place. Distributors based in one territory regularly travelled in other territories to expand business, especially in the key northern territory. Aurora's manager, Hemmad, toured Punjab, including Lahore, in mid-September 1931, “to secure contracts for our Columbia Talkies”.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *Dipali* VIII, no. 18, May 1, 1936.

<sup>41</sup> What happens to Ramaseshan after he leaves Aurora is not quite clear. He is listed as a director for the Tamil film *Urvashi Sahasam* (1940). Henceforth there are no references to him. <http://www.citwf.com/film367280.htm>.

<sup>42</sup> Hemmad's letter to Imperial, September 23, 1931, written while touring Lahore.

The following year, the two key Aurora figures, Anadi Bose and G. Ramaseshan, travelled to Bombay to further their distribution interests.<sup>43</sup> The journey appears to have been successful. A letter dated October 5, 1932, from Kamla Movietone, one of the leading producers of Lahore, signals the beginning of this relationship. This, along with a follow-up letter three days later, indicate that Aurora had secured a two week booking for one of Kamla's talkie films, *Radheshyam* (1932), in the New Cinema, Calcutta, along with a possible booking in Darjeeling. The choice was between the NT-owned New Cinema and Pearl, suggesting that Aurora had distribution links with both these theatres in Calcutta. Both these cinemas regularly screened Hindi/Urdu films; however New Cinema was part of the A circuit and largely screened first run films while the Pearl was a B circuit cinema that only screened second run films.

By October 11, a contract is drawn up and Aurora is given the distribution rights of the film for a period of one year in the eastern circuit. By 1936, Aurora and Kamla were doing regular business and Aurora had expanded this relationship by acquiring the distribution rights for other Kamla films for the Madras territory. These letters reveal that *Radheshyam* continued to be distributed for several years after the original deal. It is interesting to see that even when local productions for Hindi/Urdu films had rapidly increased, the shelf life of the film is fairly long. Extending the circulation of the film to several territories helped to prolong the life of the films. Many of these were older prints, which had completed their first and second runs, but were considered good enough to screen. This may or may not indicate the "success" of a particular film; however it does indicate the continued success in the distribution of the film. It is clear from responses in the ICCE, discussed above, that the majority of the earnings were from first run screenings in the five major cities, but the screenings continued in second run cinemas in these cities and across the entire territory, finally becoming of 'junk' value and circulating with travelling cinemas and/or in the C circuit. The exchange of letters between several film companies, available in the Aurora files, clearly point towards the continued circulation of even partially damaged prints and the tendency to exploit a film to its maximum potential without consideration

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<sup>43</sup> This trip was widely publicised in the studio news section in film journals.

for its quality. This is a recurrent theme that appears in the correspondence with Bombay.

#### **4.5 BOMBAY DREAMS: The Links with IMPERIAL MOVIE TONE**

Aurora's connection with Bombay was through a distribution link with one of the Bombay majors, Imperial (1926-38). This was one of the top Bombay studios in the silent era with several leading silent stars (Sulochana, Zubeida etc.) on its rolls. The studio was set up by Ardeshir Irani and his partner, Abdulally Esoofally. Both these men were experienced exhibitors and producers and had been involved in the film business since 1908.<sup>44</sup> Imperial produced India's first talkie, *Alam Ara* (released March 14, 1931) and imported technician Wilford Deming from America to aid in the production of their talkie – the same Deming who went on to Calcutta and aided NT in setting up their sound studio, as discussed in Chapter 2.

The first traces of a professional relationship with Imperial that I came across in the Aurora files date from January 1930; however the correspondence does not indicate that this was a new relationship, and it is quite possible that the link between these two companies went further back to 1929 when Aurora Film Corp. was incorporated. The Imperial files in the Aurora offices (at least the ones I had access to) go up to the end of 1933. The letters thus start from a fairly early stage in the history of Aurora Film Corp. and its distribution activities and, while the papers are not complete, they give us a detailed insight into the distribution practices of the silent period, especially of the Bombay industry.

Further, the period covered by these letters, telegrams and invoices marks an important phase in the history of films in India – the coming of the talkies. They give us a vivid insight into the functioning of one of the leading producers of the talkies and how the coming of the talkies played out on the ground. It should be pointed out here that these letters are invaluable not only because Imperial was the first studio to release a feature-length talkie in India, but also because the letters

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<sup>44</sup> EIC, 95; 108-109.

allow a glimpse into the anxieties and the uncertainties in Calcutta. Calcutta was the homeground of Imperial's closest competitor, the Madans, who released their first talkie, *Shirin Farhad*, a few days after *Alam Ara*.

Thus the letters are a crucial insight into the workings of the industry as they span the period of transition from silent to sound film. As discussed the history of film, especially that of Indian film, has been written with March 14, 1931, as a pivotal point which takes 'Indian cinema' to new heights. Indeed the coming of sound does bring in changes. In Calcutta, it marks the end of several companies and the beginnings of new ones, it provides a brief glimmer of hope to the sinking Madan industry before it winds up, and paves the way for new studios to come in. However, in the everyday life and workings of the industry the changes come slowly through the early 1930s and do not come unannounced. The industry is well aware of the arrival of the talkies, and the ensuing competition between Madan and Imperial, for instance, is trumpeted through studio news sections and advertisements in journals. Sound equipment too is prominently advertised by country agents signalling technological readiness for the transition to take place. The problem, however, was not with the technology but with the human interface: the human fears of adapting to new technology.

Aurora was the exclusive distributor in the eastern territory for Imperial in the late silent era and is formally identified as such on the Imperial letterhead. The relationship continued in the talkie era, though with some glitches, as a result of which Aurora was no longer the sole distributor for Imperial talkies in the eastern circuit; instead the distribution deal for their sound films was shared with a new Calcutta distributor, Dossani Film Corporation, and was worked out on a film-by-film basis.

A number of requests to screen Imperial films turn up in the Aurora files, from exhibitors based in small towns across the eastern circuit. These letters increased after March 1931, that is, after Imperial's talkie was released. Unsurprisingly, the majority of the letters were sent from Bihar, a Hindi speaking state. However, there are plenty of requests from other parts of the territory as well. While several of these originated in Ranchi and Bhagalpur, letters of intent were also sent by

exhibitors from Mozafferpur,<sup>45</sup> Patna and Gaya in Bihar; Cuttack and Puri in Orissa; Assam and other locations from the north-eastern states including Agartala and Shillong. A number of screening requests for silent films are also to be found in these files, especially from small distributors in Burma, again alluding to the agent and sub-agent in the network, seen at play in the Madras section. These letters from all over the eastern circuit bring alive the extent to which the ‘cinema habit’ had permeated through to the *mofussil* by the early 1930s.

Notably, these letters appear to be from merchants enquiring about the possibility of showing films. It is difficult to ascertain the identity of the senders, as the original letters are not in these files: the letters are addressed directly to Imperial who then forward them to Aurora. As discussed in Chapter 2 this was a period when businessmen were increasingly investing in the cinema and these letters indicate that this was not just a metropolitan phenomenon but also the case in small towns.

These letters also indicate that, similar to the arrangement with NT, these agreements are for second run films. When a request for first run films arises from a Rangoon exhibitor Imperial firmly responds, “You can inform them that we are not in a position to offer them our first run pictures but you can offer them our 2<sup>nd</sup> run pictures.”<sup>46</sup>

It appears that first run films were rarely released (if at all) in the eastern circuit by Bombay studios and, apart from exceptional cases like *Alam Ara*, there seems to be a delay of a couple of months in the release of Imperial films in the eastern circuit. As discussed in Chapter 1, Calcutta had large sections of Hindi and Urdu speaking communities. Further, the eastern territory included large segments of Hindi and Urdu speaking audiences – especially in the state of Bihar. Yet the numbers were not considered significant enough by Imperial to merit a first run. One possible reason for this could be that Hindi speaking sections in this region were poorer than their counterparts in northern and western India, and were thus unable to afford the higher ticket prices of the first run theatres. More importantly,

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<sup>45</sup> Here I am using the spelling in the letter from Imperial July 23, 1930.

<sup>46</sup> Letter from Capitol Cinema Theatre Co. Ltd., Rangoon, July 24, 1930.

the main earners from exhibition were the big city cinemas, as discussed in Chapter 3. The main cities in the eastern territory were Calcutta and Rangoon, where more affluent sections of the audience preferred foreign and Bengali films. Any Bombay films that may have been successful were likely to have been the more high-brow genres of the social and the historical. Naturally, first run cinemas in these cities did not specifically cater to the kind of audiences that the majority of Bombay films were targeting (the working class audiences). Hence Bombay producers and Bengal distributors played safe by primarily showing Bombay films in second run cinemas where they were sure of getting audiences. This could explain why Imperial refused to release first run films in the Bengal territory.

It is apparent from these letters that territorial boundaries for distribution were quite clearly marked out by the 1930s. While on the one hand Imperial forwarded letters of intent from the eastern circuit to Aurora, on the other hand Aurora passed on enquiries from places like Gorakhpur and Bareilly that lay outside their jurisdiction to Imperial.<sup>47</sup> However these territorial markers did not always work well. Several instances of illicit exhibition within these territories surface in the Aurora files – screenings held without the knowledge, or consent, of the distributor – suggesting that such practices were not quite uncommon.

One such infringement into their territory was reported by Aurora to Imperial. In a letter on October 20, 1930 Imperial requests Select Pictures, Bangalore (their southern agents) to investigate a possible breach of contract regarding the unauthorised screening of their film, *Gulshan-i-Arab* (1929), in Cuttack, in the eastern circuit. Cuttack was within Aurora's circuit but the screening was advertised without Aurora's knowledge. Imperial writes to Select Pictures to look into the infringement. The owners of the Cuttack theatre also owned a cinema at Cocanada in the southern territory, and Imperial insinuates that the film print scheduled for screening in Cocanada had been sent to Cuttack for screening on the sly, without the knowledge of Imperial, the producers, who would be entitled to a share of the profits from the screening. If this was indeed the case then the

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<sup>47</sup> Letter from Aurora to Imperial, September 23, 1930.

distributor or exhibitor concerned was making money on the film without declaring it and therefore not parting with the due share of the profits to Imperial. Aurora discovers the advertisements for the film in the Cuttack theatre and reports the breach, as it feels cheated out of its share of the business. Such breaches of contract were not unheard of and allegations that distributing agents did not fully declare their income were common. The dispute took a few months to resolve and a bi-partite settlement appears to have been reached between Aurora and Kinema Film Service of Madras, the owner of the two cinemas in question.<sup>48</sup>

In another letter of December 8, 1930, Ramaseshan says that on a trip to Burma he discovered that films were directly rented out by Imperial in the *mofussil* of Burma. He asks Imperial to send the statements and credit note for these screenings. These letters point to the fact that despite the territoriality in the business a grey market was emerging with unauthorised screenings that were unaccounted for.

A recurring theme in these letters is the problem with inadequate title-cards. Given the simultaneous presence of multiple audiences in Calcutta, silent films were shown with inter-titles in several languages. These languages included Bengali, English, Hindi and Urdu and in some cases Gujarati and are a good indicator of the range of audiences for these films in second run Calcutta cinemas. However, on more than one occasion inter-titles in one of these languages are found to be missing from the cards sent by Imperial. This results in persistent letters from Aurora's Ramaseshan urging Imperial to send the cards with the missing language. On one instance Ramaseshan writes, "Urdu titles absolutely necessary". Further on he insists, "every other Bombay picture is now released here with English Bengali Hindi and Urdu titles."<sup>49</sup>

A couple of points need to be made here: first, the fact that Urdu titles were essential for Bombay films showing in Calcutta confirms the industry's acknowledgement of the sizeable Urdu speaking population in the eastern circuit. Secondly, Ramaseshan's insistence of "every other Bombay picture" suggests that Bombay

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<sup>48</sup> Letter from Imperial, May 9, 1931.

<sup>49</sup> Letters between Aurora and Imperial, August - October, 1930.

films were regularly shown in Calcutta and the eastern territory and further points to the cosmopolitan nature of the Calcutta audiences by suggesting the presence of Urdu speaking audiences “here”.

A further response from the Publicity Department of Imperial assures Aurora that English titles are also being included, indicating that for Aurora titles in English were also essential. The question that arises here is who is this English-literate audience for the films, given that they are B and C circuit Bombay films? As discussed in Chapter 3, contemporary journals and the ICCE in particular highlight a class bias in the preference for films. The educated classes, who were comfortable with the English language were, in general, opposed to the kind of cinema coming in from Bombay. We can here take a considered guess that the English speaking audience for these films were students and clerks in the cities and towns of eastern India – in Calcutta, Dacca, Jamshedpur, Ranchi, Rangoon, etc. – industrial towns which had a sizeable population of English-speaking workers as well as schools and universities. In addition the audience would have been soldiers from cantonments, which were located in and around these towns.

There are several letters on the titles, regarding the language, quality, cost of preparing the titles etc. In one instance Ramaseshan sends a telegram: “*Father India* titles defective cannot use in big centres”.<sup>50</sup> The wording suggests that this “defective” title could be used in smaller centres – an approach that resonates with Laharry’s differentiation of big and small cinemas, discussed in Chapter 3.

Further, squeezing in inter-titles in five languages into one frame created a problem of readability. A letter from Aurora on October 20, has a long paragraph on the problems with titles, which is quoted here almost in entirety:

“It appears you do not take trouble to see that the titles are sufficiently long – to facilitate the audience to read the same to a finish. Before they read the first line the titles are off. This is one trouble. Then again in many places there are no Hindi and Urdu titles. In some places the titles are not readable as the same are too much on the border. If the Operator adjusts to make the English Titles readable – the Urdu titles (being the last line) are covered.

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<sup>50</sup> Letter from Imperial, October 30, 1930.

There was much of shouting and bombardment about the titles that the drop in business was effected the very next day. The Sunday figures for any Indian pictures in the Pearl have always exceeded the Sat. figures – this (*Father India*) business being an exception....” [Emphasis Original]<sup>51</sup>

Several points become clear from this quote. Imperial is cutting down on the raw film used by squeezing in all the inter-titles into one title card and by not allowing the titles to hold long enough to allow for sufficient reading time. Production values are compromised here in the interests of cost-cutting. We also realise that the audience is not about to put up with this shoddy treatment. Not only do they protest rowdily during the screening, but word gets round quickly and fewer numbers go in to see the film the following day, suggesting the presence of an active information network amongst the Pearl cinema’s audiences.

A month and a half later Aurora reports that the Pearl Cinema has declined to screen the film, *Red Signal* (1929, Imperial), as the titles are too short. Aurora writes,

“We do not understand why you people are getting so very careless in these Important matters.... It seems that no attention is given to the length of titles and the length is the same whether a title reads in one, two or even three lines.”<sup>52</sup>

On an earlier occasion, asserts Aurora, a film was screened at the Pearl even though one set of language inter-titles had not arrived.<sup>53</sup> It becomes evident that, once advertised, a film had to be screened even with a problem, unless the film in question had not arrived. This again suggests that films were blind booked for screening without the exhibitor or the distributor seeing them. It appears from this letter that film prints with the corrected titles had not arrived on time on more than one occasion. Aurora cites several instances when screenings for the Saturday had been cancelled as late as Friday because Imperial had despatched the film by ordinary train, and not by the faster Mail train, possibly in an effort to cut postage costs. It is also clear that Imperial directly controlled all its prints by inserting the

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<sup>51</sup> Letter from Imperial, October 20, 1930.

<sup>52</sup> Letter to Imperial, December 2, 1930.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

titles in its laboratory and then sending these to its distributors. This would also have been a means of controlling costs.

The other recurring issue is that of bad quality prints. Aurora complains several times that the film prints sent by Imperial are often unusable. This problem escalates by early 1931, with several letters from Ramaseshan to Ardeshir Irani indicating that they were also sending back cuttings from the film to prove how bad the print was. In a letter of February 5, 1931, Ramaseshan says that he has chosen to send Ardeshir a couple of clips that are particularly spoiled where,

“...the joints are bad and there are sprocket marks running over the picture.... If this is the condition in which new copies are to go out of the Imperial studio, you will admit, it is no compliment to you and to your firm....”<sup>54</sup>

‘Junk’ prints, as we have seen, were a common feature of film circulation in the South Asian market, and these discussions are a clear indication that the practice was not just limited to foreign films but extended to the circulation of local productions as well, in an effort to gain maximum returns out of each print. Yet the poor quality of the Imperial films becomes a big point of contention between the two companies signifying that the industry and audiences were used to better quality films by this time. By 1933 Imperial writes to Aurora that they would not make any new prints of their silent films as silent films were no longer profitable.

This saga over the technical quality of the prints continues – Irani says the print was brand new and the film was “not run at their end” before despatching to Aurora and damaging sprocket marks could have been caused by a trial run at Aurora’s end. Ramaseshan refutes this and also claims that the joints were badly edited. It appears that Imperial did not pay careful attention to the technical excellence of its film prints sent for exhibition. One is reminded here of the oft-quoted letter by Wilford Deming, printed in the *American Cinematographer* and cited above, discussing his experiences of making movies in India. Deming, the sound technical adviser to both Imperial and New Theatres, condemns the working conditions, technical facilities and the lack of attention to quality by his

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<sup>54</sup> Letter to Imperial, February 5, 1931.

Bombay collaborators while praising the facilities and abilities of the New Theatres crew. The Aurora letters in 1930 and early 1931 highlight this disregard for technical excellence by Imperial suggesting it was part of the work culture of Imperial.

#### **4.5.2 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IMPERIAL AND AURORA**

Imperial was one of Aurora's most significant customers in the 1930s and the interactions between the two occupy several files in the Aurora file cabinets. The reason is not surprising: Imperial was a regular supplier of films to Aurora at a time when few producers or production houses stayed afloat long enough to be able to make films regularly. There can be little doubt that the Bombay films were getting Aurora good business. For instance, on February 21, 1931 Aurora writes with a request for additional sets of photos for each Imperial film suggesting the films were doing well. The correspondence reveals that Aurora took great effort to keep the relationship intact.

By 1931 Imperial was one of the largest producers of films in the subcontinent,<sup>55</sup> certainly in Bombay, and this position carried a certain weight about it. While there is a general sense of cordiality amongst the writers of these letters a sense of the balance of power in this relationship surfaces at several places in the correspondence. This balance clearly tilts in favour of Imperial after the latter's importance catapults with the release of *Alam Ara*, India's first full-length talkie. Thereafter, Imperial starts to adopt a more commanding tone in general in the letters.

The discussion above already brings to the fore ensuing tensions regarding the quality of the prints and the titles. Further, Imperial did also, on occasion, use pressure tactics to push Aurora to pay extra for prints or publicity material. These did not go unchallenged by Aurora. For instance, in a response to Imperial Ramaseshan alleges, "...we are really disappointed at Mr. Ardeshir's telegram. We really fail to see how you could force pictures on us in the way you are trying

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to do...”<sup>56</sup> Ramaseshan is complaining that he is being forced to take the film, *Devadasi* (1925), at a higher price.<sup>57</sup> On another occasion, in a letter to Broacha of Imperial, Aurora alleges that Imperial is charging more for a Phototone portable set to Aurora despite an earlier assurance of giving Aurora a 10 percent discount on equipment.<sup>58</sup>

In a further exchange regarding the number of posters that Aurora was to buy for the film *Madhuri* in October and November 1931, Imperial tries to sell 500 posters, on account that they have to reprint. Aurora flatly refuses saying that, “...as you know well our limit up to which we can distribute the above picture.” The bargaining and pressure tactics continue and Aurora finally agrees on 150 posters. The correspondence suggests that, at the time, Aurora had approximately 30 exhibitors in their network.<sup>59</sup>

A clear case of Imperial’s high-handedness can be seen in the interactions regarding the censoring and exhibition of its silent film *Anarkali* (Imperial, 1928), starring Sulochana. The film, a historical, was seen by the Bengal Board of Film Censors (BBFC) several times between December 1930 and January 1931, but was not passed for screening in part of the eastern circuit - it was banned by the government in Bengal and Assam. As discussed in Chapter 3, the BBFC was tougher than the other censor boards. In August, 1931, Aurora wrote to Imperial stating that they would try to re-censor the film in the remaining states of the eastern circuit - Bihar and Orissa – where the film had not been banned by the government.<sup>60</sup> The film was finally passed for exhibition in Bihar and Orissa only, as is apparent from letters in January and February 1932.

Following this, Aurora requests Imperial for a print of the film saying that there is considerable interest in the film in the state of Bihar. As the film could not be shown in the entire eastern circuit, Aurora claims that it was not financially viable

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<sup>56</sup> Letter to Imperial, March 7, 1931.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Letter to Imperial, October 29, 1931.

<sup>59</sup> Letter to Imperial, October 29, 1931.

<sup>60</sup> Letter to Imperial, August 19, 1931.

to order a new print of the film for distribution in one state.<sup>61</sup> Imperial responds by saying that they only have one print which they are exhibiting in “our circuit” and that, “In these days of keen competition of Talkie pictures, it does not pay us to prepare new copies of our old films...”<sup>62</sup> They also insist that they are happy to make a new copy for Aurora to distribute in the eastern circuit, ignoring Aurora’s plea that the expense is not worthwhile. Imperial, here, is trying to push their business interests by pressuring Aurora to pay for a new print. This would not only get Imperial immediate return for the cost of the film print but if Aurora were to pay for a print they would then be forced to push for further distribution of the film in the east, and a percentage of these screenings would go to Imperial. Thus a new print would ensure regular business.

In addition, Imperial also tries to put pressure on Aurora by alleging that they are not doing enough to ensure that the censors clear the film for distribution in the entire Bengal province. Imperial writes, “As this subject has now been passed by the Bombay Board of Film Censors as well as the Madras Board of Film Censors, there is no reason why it should not be passed by the Calcutta Board if you only attempt it in the proper quarters.”<sup>63</sup>

Aurora gives in to the pressure by applying for a re-certification. Imperial is forwarded the application to which they respond:

“...your letter to the Board... is by no means the kind of communication a job like this requires, in that it is neither effectively written nor sufficiently argumentative. We are sure an official body like the Board of Film Censors would have certainly appreciated a better representation from you, and our experience has shown that a good, sensible, effectively drafted first representation is generally half the battle.”<sup>64</sup>

Imperial’s fears are proved correct. The BBFC refuses the application of re-certification for the film in February 1932, on the grounds that it has been banned by the Bengal government. It has to be noted that Imperial’s response, quoted above, is written before they hear of the BBFC’s refusal.

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<sup>61</sup> Letter to Imperial, January 23, 1932.

<sup>62</sup> Letter to Aurora, January 26, 1932.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Letter to Aurora, February 5, 1932.

Imperial's stance in this exchange of letters is open to several interpretations. It is clear that Imperial saw Aurora's functioning as not quite up to professional standards and is therefore commenting on it. This perception is to be found in several of their letters questioning Aurora's ability to push films for distribution and their sales tactics in what Imperial sees as meagre returns from the eastern territory. In these letters Imperial clearly lays the blame on Aurora asking why the films are lying around and not shown more often and why they are not being marketed more aggressively. This is especially the case with the three talkie films that Aurora takes up for distribution.

It could be argued that Imperial does have a say in this since this is costing them business. However the tone in these letters not only smacks of frustration but is also high-handed. Imperial is getting quite imperious by this time and the power equation in this exchange is becoming more and more pronounced. Is it that with the talkies Imperial bosses feel that they are in a position to command the market? Or does this stem from a changing power equation between Bombay and Calcutta?

A second interpretation of these letters is to acknowledge the difference in the workings of the industry in Calcutta and Bombay – censor board, distribution, exhibition and what films sell. Imperial is unable to understand this difference and hence the frustration. For instance, Aurora's assertion that the Gandhi topical were unable to draw crowds in Calcutta surprises Imperial and they attribute this failure to bad business tactics on the part of Aurora. However, what Imperial fails to understand is that the political climate in Calcutta was markedly different from Bombay. Bengal had a strong nationalist movement, with its own set of leaders and it is quite possible that Gandhi was not as big a draw as some of the other local nationalist leaders of the time. For instance, a topical of the funeral of nationalist leader C. R. Das was widely shown in several Madan cinemas in 1925.<sup>65</sup> Perhaps Gandhi was not a big draw in the Pearl Theatre, in September 1931, with its working class audience.<sup>66</sup> Further, *Anarkali* was a historical and

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<sup>65</sup> Advertisement in *The Statesman*, June 1925.

<sup>66</sup> Letter to Imperial, September 1, 1931.

given the widespread nationalist resistance in the Bengal Province, it was certain to attract the attention of the administration and the BBFC for any perceived political content.

These issues come to a head with the talkies and Imperial does not automatically resort to Aurora when they are scouting around for distributors for their first talkie, as we will see; instead they offer the film to the highest bidder.

#### **4.6 SOUND EFFECTS: AURORA, IMPERIAL AND THE TALKIES**

Towards the end of 1930 a few letters and telegrams were exchanged between Imperial and Aurora regarding distribution rights for the following year. Ramaseshan wrote a personal letter to Ardeshir Irani saying that,

“There is a lot of rumours in the market that other people have fixed up Imperials contract for 1931. I do not care for wild rumours. I am only depending on you and the promise you have given me. More than that I am also relying upon my own claims. **If Imperial and other Bombay companies pictures are having a market here today it is because of the spade work I have done here.** Your office may perhaps conveniently forget that. But I am sure you cannot be so ungenerous as to forget me and my labours for Imperial.”<sup>67</sup> [Emphasis Mine]

The personal tone of this letter is striking. Ramaseshan is departing from the official tone in favour of a direct address to Irani. Further, the letter is written in Ramaseshan’s own handwriting, as opposed to it being typed, and is marked “Private”. The direct appeal is adopted as a strategy to ensure the business deal remains with Aurora, on the grounds of familiarity. It is almost an invocation of a familial connection – a reminder of the feudal modes of organisational and business practices that were prevalent in the studio era.

However, Ramaseshan’s appeal does not stop at invoking the established link that Aurora has with Imperial. He bolsters this with the claim that he, and thus Aurora, is responsible for creating the market for Bombay films in Calcutta. The claim may not be too misplaced given that there were not many distributors for Bombay

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<sup>67</sup> Letter from Ramaseshan to Ardehir Irani of Imperial, December 18, 1930.

films in Calcutta, and Aurora would most certainly have been an important intermediary in getting these films to Calcutta audiences. Here Ramaseshan's address shifts from the feudal to the capitalist mode. The two approaches are not seen to be contradictory; rather they coexist in this letter, each complementing the other and doubling Ramaseshan's claim to the continuation of the business link on both counts. In Aurora's world the old order has not quite given forth to the new, and while Aurora is aware of the new world it carries the old ways of doing business into the new world.

At the end of 1930, when this letter was written, the world of films in India was indeed poised for change and Imperial was at the very heart of this change. Sound had entered the world of cinema and Ardeshir Irani was at this point engaged in the production of what was to be India's first sound feature, *Alam Ara* (1931). Imperial responds to Ramaseshan's letter with a telegram on December 22, with a "Come Immediately". Ramaseshan rushes to Bombay, however his efforts do not pay off. Imperial takes its time in sending the agreement for 1931. There is no news until February and, as we now realise, that was because Imperial was reconsidering the distribution arrangement.

On the February 5, Ramaseshan writes again to Irani, this time specifically regarding distribution of the talkies,

"... I hear you have already fixed up with The Chitra for the first talkie. What about your promise to us that the Pearl will get it and we will get the distribution. I hope you will not make any other arrangement unless you give us the chance of a refusal."

Clearly Imperial was treating the talkies as an entirely different product from the silent, with a first run release in a top Calcutta cinema. This is also made clear when Imperial confirms that the distribution arrangements for the talkies would remain separate from the silents. Thus while Aurora distributed their silent productions in the eastern circuit, Dossani would handle their talkies. Imperial was entering a new phase with the talkies and their desire to release their first talkie at Chitra indicates their intention of moving up several notches in the exhibition pecking order in the city. Chitra was not only a first run theatre but also

an exclusive theatre with all the embellishments of respectability (see Chapter 3). Another significant factor that would have led Imperial to prefer Chitra over the Pearl was that the latter was a second run cinema whereas Chitra was the only high-class sound equipped cinema theatre in Calcutta for Indian films that was not owned by the Madans. Madan Theatres were, after all, in direct competition with Imperial in the run up for the release of their first Indian talkie, *Shirin Farhad* (1931).<sup>68</sup>

In this discussion it is important to put the arrival of the talkies in context. Sound film and technology was not new to Calcutta. The Madans were the first studio in India to import sound projection and production equipment. They fitted sound projectors in cinemas in Calcutta and elsewhere within their exhibition circuit and started to import Hollywood sound films from 1929. They had also shot a series of short films with sound and screened these in Calcutta on February 14, 1931, a month before the release of *Alam Ara*.<sup>69</sup> Foreign sound films were already playing in city cinemas and the film journals had regular updates and articles on the sound films under production in Calcutta and Bombay. The publicity machinery had ensured that both the Imperial and the Madan films had plenty of exposure before they were released. The writing in the film journals generally welcomed the coming of sound on the grounds that this would lead to a dialogue driven narrative of psychological realism and help to weed out the action-oriented films that were popular amongst the masses.

In contrast, the transition to sound was not easy for people within the industry. Exhibitors especially did not readily welcome the change. This had to do with cost: especially for exhibitors sound meant that the entire projection equipment had to be overhauled and additional investment put in. On the production side it was a harrowing time as new filming equipment had to be acquired, technicians had to learn to operate the new technology, the conditions of shooting had to change and actors had to learn new skills of voice modulation and gain a mastery over the language. Knowledge of the language as well as clear diction was a must. In addition, from the first talkies, songs were an important addition to the films

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<sup>68</sup> *Shirin Farhad* was released a few days after *Alam Ara*.

<sup>69</sup> Bagishwar Jha, "Who had the First Word?" *Cinema Vision* Vol. 1, no. 2 (1980): 23

and a good singing voice became essential for an actor to be successful in the talkies.

There were other reservations about the talkies that did not entirely have to do with costs or learning new skills; rather they had to do with a human reluctance in accepting and transiting to a new technology. In what can now be seen as a momentous letter dated March 10, 1931, from Aurora to Imperial, this resistance becomes apparent. The letter is dated just four days before *Alam Ara*, was released in Bombay's Majestic Cinema. The letter from Aurora is in response to a circular that Imperial sent around to all its distributors. This circular, which I did not have access to, appears to have been a set of Terms and Conditions for distribution of Imperial talkies. Aurora's response to this circular is that Imperial's conditions "...are too much for any customer big or small."<sup>70</sup> Aurora refers to several exhibitors from Bengal and Rangoon and says,

“... None of them are prepared to pay more than 50% of the collections. We may induce them to accept 60% for the picture and machinery. Nor will they pay any guarantee as it is a trial.”<sup>71</sup>

This indicates the apprehension felt by exhibitors towards the changes in technology and their uncertainties about committing to a new media form. Clearly, they look upon the forthcoming talkie as a “trial”. However, it is not just the exhibitors' scepticism regarding the talkies that comes through in this letter. Aurora too is wary of the business prospects of Imperial's talkie and in the letter Aurora appears to function as a parent body trying to protect the interests of its exhibitors, while at the same time voicing its own doubts. It follows up the doubts and objections of the exhibitors with,

“In our opinion, we should not insist upon minimum guarantee since any exhibitor who makes money will not pay more than he earns.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Letter to Imperial, March 10, 1931.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

The statement above is indicative of Aurora's misgivings, and these are couched in the words of welfare towards its network of exhibitors. As regards Aurora's direct interests in distribution it says,

“Re: The Agency. We shall distribute the pictures on commission basis or as an alternative we shall pay some Royalty and the cost of the new prints at cost price. It is for you to fix up the Royalty for this territory considering the fact that it is a new venture and the exhibitors have to be influenced to make their ‘Talkie Houses’.”<sup>73</sup>

Aurora is open to this new business opportunity, but cautiously open. This is also clear from the discussion regarding the equipment, “Re: the buying up the machinery. We are prepared to buy up two sets on instalment basis.”

Another relevant point needs to be made here. Aurora rented talkie equipment from Imperial, which in turn imported it. Aurora did not directly import the equipment. The Madans on the other hand were getting their talkie equipment directly from Hollywood. J. J. Madan had toured Hollywood in 1929 and brought back with him sound equipment and films and, as said above, had already made and screened some short films in sound. And by this time they were not only producing their sound feature film but also fitted exhibition theatres with sound equipment. Imperial used the Tanar sound systems whereas Madans used RCA equipment, which had a better sound output.<sup>74</sup>

Thus there was more than one source by which Calcutta producers and exhibitors were getting their talkie equipment. As at the turn of the century when film arrived through several and multiple means, so with sound, there were several routes by which it arrived into the city. This is where the strength of the colonial network played an important role. The network was wide-based, even rhizomatic, with several circuits intersecting across the globe and therefore did not allow for a monopoly or for one particular sound system to rule. By 1931 this was a mature market with several independent structures and networks feeding into and out of it. The networks were operating at the transnational, national, as well as provincial

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Madan Theatres was the country agents for RCA portable equipment in India at this time.

levels all at once, as is apparent in the study of the Aurora papers. This argument will be developed further in the following chapter.

On March 14, Imperial wrote directly to Mrs. D. P. Sorabjee, the proprietor of Pearl Theatre, and copied Aurora into the letter. This letter, in response to one that Sorabjee had written to Imperial, confirms that Pearl was converting to sound equipment:

“We are glad to learn that you are making arrangements for wiring the Pearl Theatre with a R.C.A. set and are also thinking of getting a portable set.”<sup>75</sup>

The letter also confirms that Imperial is open to building on their relationship with Aurora and Pearl by talking through terms for the second run exhibition. Imperial asks Sorabjee (and Ramaseshan presumably) to come to Bombay to directly discuss distribution of talkies:

“We are afraid it will be very difficult to come to an understanding regarding distribution of our talkies for your territory by mere correspondence, and if you are really serious to take up the distribution of our talkies, we would advise you to come over to Bombay without the least possible delay so that we can discuss the matter to our mutual advantage and satisfaction.”<sup>76</sup>

The letter gives us an insight into the thought processes of Imperial at this time. March 14 was the date of release of their first talkie. In this letter, written on the same date, Imperial does insist on a minimum guarantee for the film but also adds:

“...The terms suggested by us in our last letter are intended for the first talkie only, and the results obtained on that will serve as a guide for terms of future business.”<sup>77</sup>

This indicates that Imperial too is testing the waters regarding this new commodity that they are releasing in the market. On March 19, Imperial wires:

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<sup>75</sup> Letter from Imperial to Mrs. Sorabjee, March 14, 1931.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

“We are offered twenty five thousand for Bengal Burma Rights Acamara [sic] are you interested if so wire best offer ---Ardeshir---”<sup>78</sup>

To this Aurora responds in a letter dated March 25:

“We are really surprised at your latest telegram containing fabulous offer, you say you have received from one party in this territory. If it were really true (and we wish it is) we shall only be too glad to see that you fix up your talkies with that party for that price.

“Your first talkie has been released here and we are sure you must have been in receipt of the statement of collections on it and a perusal of that will certainly disillusion you from the pictures of the future you have imagined for yourselves.”<sup>79</sup>

The aggressive tone of this letter is unmistakable. Is Aurora adopting this tone to be able to negotiate better terms? Or is this approach taken on the premise that *Alam Ara* has not performed well at Chitra in the first run and thus the likelihood of the film’s prospects in subsequent runs in Calcutta and the rest of the eastern circuit was low. And thus, Aurora is not willing to give in to what they see are difficult terms for an untested product? Further, Aurora may also have anticipated that if the film had not done well in an A-circuit cinema like the Chitra, it would quickly move to the B-circuit, and thus could be negotiated on better terms than what Imperial was offering originally. Aurora goes on to explain:

“As for ourselves, we do not either like to stand in your way nor do we like to cut our own throats. What we have offered you is just the reasonable amount which anybody with any sense of business justice can do. If you care anything at all for our old connections and have any confidence in our business capacity, we are sure you will try your 1931 picture with us, and then the year is closed it will be sufficient time for both of us to take stock and renew the other contracts perhaps with better terms.”

Aurora is being cautious in its approach to the distribution of talkies. Perhaps the aggressive nature of this letter also stemmed from a confidence within the Aurora management that Imperial will ultimately give them the contract for the distribution of *Alam Ara*, given the longstanding relationship the two companies shared.

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<sup>78</sup> Telegram to Aurora, March 19, 1931.

<sup>79</sup> Letter to Imperial, March 25, 1931.

This confidence proves to be misplaced. Aurora is unable to grasp the changing nature of business practices in Bombay. The plan backfires. In a letter dated March 28 Imperial writes:

“Dealing with the portion of your letter dated the 25<sup>th</sup> instant referring to our talkie, kindly be advised that the territorial rights on same have now been definitely disposed of in favour of a party in your station and that this closes the matter so far as your office is concerned.

“We are happy to inform you that this deal has brought us a price – according to you fabulous but according to the buyer reasonable.”<sup>80</sup>

The buyer, in this case, turns out to be Dossani. From subsequent correspondence it is confirmed that the “deal”, in the quote above, is not for the first run of the film in Calcutta, which was in Chitra, but for the second run, and for distribution outside Calcutta. In a further letter Aurora requests Imperial to ask Chitra to hand over the print of *Alam Ara* after the screening is completed there, so that Aurora can send the film to Dacca to be screened at the Picture House from April 11.<sup>81</sup>

Further, Aurora says that they will push for distribution elsewhere if the film does well at Dacca’s Picture House: “...we will be in a position to induce the other Muffusal people either to wire up their houses, or we ourselves will arrange for portable talkie sets as has been done in this case.”<sup>82</sup>

This is quite a change from the aggressive tone adopted in the earlier letters when Aurora was trying to cut down the commission on the talkie films. Aurora’s approach changes between March 25 and 31, and this may have been because they had already got to know that Imperial had worked out a deal with a competitor. The aggressive tone of the earlier letter may have been based on a misplaced belief in the strength of their long relationship with Imperial. However, a realisation must have crept in, in this interim period, to the effect that they need to show positive results and demonstrate the ability to get bookings rather than simply depend on the strength of a long-standing relationship to get the contract.

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<sup>80</sup> Letter from Imperial, March 28, 1931, received at Aurora on 2<sup>nd</sup> April.

<sup>81</sup> Letter to Imperial, March 31, 1931.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

The aggression disappears, with Aurora taking a more pro-active approach. Within three days Aurora arranges an exhibition in Dacca, a key “station” in their circuit and also offers to explore other possibilities. However, the distribution rights for the second run in the eastern circuit are already sold to Dossani Film Corporation and Aurora is asked to contact Dossani for any further screenings of *Alam Ara*.<sup>83</sup>

Imperial scoffs at Aurora, bolstered by the heady triumph of India’s first talkie film:

“...we are not able to relish your more or less constant statements that exhibitors on your side require persuasion from you to play talking pictures. According to more sanguine experience, no such permission is ever required anywhere as you can see from the fact that we have already achieved voluminous business on the very first Indian talkie placed on the market.”<sup>84</sup>

We see here two different approaches to business at odds with each other – the feudal and the capitalist. The Dossanis were Sindhi businessmen, and were one of several groups coming into the film business in Calcutta at this time on the strength of their ready cash flow. Imperial clearly subscribes to the capitalist system –the highest bidder gets the deal. It takes a while for Aurora to come to terms with this, and when they do, they have already lost out to the buying power of Dossani. This difference between Bombay and Calcutta emerges sharply at this time: Bombay succeeds on the basis of moving to a capitalist system whereas Calcutta companies continue to embrace the feudal system, a duel that once again comes into play at the end of the 1930s with an exodus of stars from Calcutta, most notably the big NT stars like K. L. Saigal et al., who moved to Bombay on the strength of Bombay’s greater financial power.

*Alam Ara* was not as successful as the Madan talkies that followed closely on its heels. This is generally attributed to the better quality of the sound recording in the Madan films which used the RCA equipment that allowed for a better output than Imperial’s Tanar system.<sup>85</sup> Further, as discussed in Chapter 2, *Shirin Farhad*

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<sup>83</sup> Letter from Imperial April 1, 1931, received at Aurora on April 4, 1931.

<sup>84</sup> Letter from Imperial April 4, 1931, received at Aurora on April 7, 1931.

<sup>85</sup> EIC, 254.

starred Jahanara Kajjan and Master Nissar, two popular stars from the Parsi theatre and had many more songs than *Alam Ara*, which aided in its popularity.

A further turn occurred in this relationship between Imperial, Dossani and Aurora. Dossani started to act as the local agent of Imperial at this point; films, bills and payments to and from Aurora were being routed through Dossani in April and May 1931. Aurora did not take very kindly to this. Ultimately the relationship between Aurora and Imperial appears to have normalised and continued into the sound era, with Aurora acquiring distribution rights to a few Imperial talkies on a film by film basis, including the Sulochana hit *Madhuri* (1932, talkie).

Through the negotiations between Aurora and the other studios, discussed in this chapter, film is discussed primarily as a commodity. The industry is concerned with estimating and fixing the value of the commodity and extending its life by ensuring that the value of this perishable commodity continues for as long as possible. The aim of the producer (Imperial, EFS etc.) and the distributor is to ensure that the commodity stays in circulation for as long as possible and networks of distribution are developed to ensure that. Stretching the life of the filmic commodity occurs at two levels: first by configuring distinct circuits and extending the reach of the film by finding wide distribution and publicity through these circuits – in primary markets (cities, A circuit) followed by circulation in secondary markets (*mofussil*, B and C circuits, travelling cinemas), through simultaneous and multiple prints. Secondly, the extension of the life of the film occurs through continued circulation of the film print itself – through the second run and subsequent runs, ultimately filtering down to ‘junk’ prints. This is the economy that is being unravelled in this chapter through the study of the Aurora letters.

The Aurora papers confirm the presence of a complex distribution structure by the early 1930s that catered to the tiered system of exhibition discussed in Chapter 3 and, for the first time ever, reveal intricate operational practices that allowed the industries in Calcutta, Madras and Bombay to move beyond their immediate regions. The distribution network crisscrossed across the expanse of colonial South Asia taking films to *mofussil* towns located away from the metropolitan

centres through local agents and sub-agents. It can be argued that this complex, organic structure evolved from the late 1920s and through the 1930s, certainly after the ICC Enquiry of 1927-28. The papers also confirm that this was not a uni-directional flow, pointing to a multi-centred approach to film in colonial South Asia.

Moreover, Aurora's considerable presence in the Madras circuit, its role as a distributor for Bombay studios, along with its distribution and co-production activities for producers from the northern circuit all render it a key film distributor in the pan-Indian territory. Further papers in the Aurora files point to a significant presence outside South Asia.

## CHAPTER 5:

### TRANSNATIONAL JOURNEYS

*“... the nation as an important  
but not sufficient site of media analysis...”<sup>1</sup>*

In the 1930s the Calcutta-based Aurora Film Corporation was a subcontinental entity, rather than a ‘regional’ organisation, given its considerable presence in other circuits. However, that was not the limit of Aurora’s film business. A set of documents in the Aurora cabinets that have never come to light before suggests that Aurora was involved in transnational film distribution in the 1930s. These documents become a further confirmation of the inadequacies of the national as a relevant paradigm for the study of film in this period. These and other efforts at transnational explorations of Calcutta producers and distributors will be discussed in this chapter, thereby strengthening Calcutta’s importance as a centre of film within and beyond the subcontinent.

#### 5.1 BEYOND THE OCEAN: AURORA’S TRANSNATIONAL AMBITIONS

In December 1934 Aurora entered into an exclusive distribution arrangement with NT for the distribution of all NT films including “present (except those already sold) and all future releases” in S. E. Asia including Malaya, Siam, Indo-China, Fiji and the Dutch East Indies.<sup>2</sup> From a subsequent letter in August 1935 it is clear that Aurora was not renting but buying the film prints outright from NT for distribution. Each film print and its publicity was to be bought at Rs. 3250.<sup>3</sup>

The contract, valid for two years, states that the films would be handed over for distribution to Aurora a month after their release in Calcutta. This last clause

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<sup>1</sup> Curtin, “Media capital: Towards the study of spatial flows,” in *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 6 no. 2 (2003): 204.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Aurora to NT, December 24, 1934.

<sup>3</sup> Letter from NT, August 17, 1935.

becomes a contentious one as NT clarifies in a follow-up letter that, “the delivery of prints would be made at our earliest convenience and this may or may not be within a month from the date of release of the picture in Calcutta.”<sup>4</sup>

Clearly, NT wants to be able to keep the option open – possibly to be able to run the film print for longer in Chitra, in the event that a film became a hit in the city. As discussed above, NT films were first released in Chitra or New Cinema before they were screened elsewhere. These letters imply that even top studios like NT kept costs down by making just one or two film prints and circulating these widely through successive layers of the distribution network. What is also significant here is that the films are considered for release in overseas territories within a month of their release in Calcutta. Remarkably, NT was already considering the circulation of these films overseas, in territories that may not have had sizeable audiences, clearly suggesting that by this time overseas territories are on the radar of mainstream producers and distributors in India.

Further, it appears from the exchange of letters that NT already had their productions circulating in S. E. Asia before this contract with Aurora had been drawn up, stressing that “... the pictures already released in the territory under negotiation, will not be offered to you again.” According to NT’s authorised filmography, by mid-1935 NT had produced eleven Urdu and six Hindi films, alongside thirteen Bengali films.<sup>5</sup> The question then remains to be asked: Who was already distributing these films in S. E. Asia for NT? While I have not found any evidence regarding this in the Aurora archive a cursory search of Singapore newspapers revealed that NT’s 1933 film, *Puran Bhakt*, was being distributed in S. E. Asia in 1934 by the Shaw Brothers.<sup>6</sup>

This foray into international distribution by NT and Aurora was not a singular case. It is quite clear from the handful of letters and contracts that I have been able to avail in the Aurora offices that overseas distribution of local productions was a continual activity even if not a substantial or a significant one.

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<sup>4</sup> Letter from NT, August 23, 1935.

<sup>5</sup> Chakraborty, *Chalachitrer Itihase New Theatres*.

<sup>6</sup> Advertisements in the *Malaya Tribune*, March-April, 1934.

Other documents emerge from the late 1930s related to Aurora's efforts at exploring international distribution for its own production, *Tarzan ki Beti* (Daughter of Tarzan, 1938). These arrangements were for S. E. Asia and the Middle East and the notable point about these international distributors is that they were also of Indian origin. For instance, a contract for distribution of the film in Iraq was drawn up in April, 1939, with Messrs. Hans Raj and Sri Krishan – Indian origin names but the address on the contract is a post box address in Baghdad. The contract refers to several correspondences over March and April (which are not extant in the Aurora files) and confirms that a new print of *Tarzan ki Beti* was to be leased out for three months for distribution in Iraq for a “fixed hire” of Rs. 600. In addition, Aurora asked for a deposit of Rs 1000 as a guarantee for the “safe return of the print” in good condition. The cost of transportation and insurance etc. was to be borne by the Iraqi distributor, while Aurora would send them the publicity, as per standard practice. The contract specifies that in the event that local censors banned the film from exhibition in Iraq the advanced amount would be returned; in that case the distributor would only incur the cost of transport. Further, if the distributor was found to exhibit the film outside of Iraqi territory then each unauthorised screening would be charged at Rs. 250, and the deposit of thousand rupees forfeited.<sup>7</sup> This last clause recalls the stress on territorial boundaries in distribution arrangements, seen in Chapter 4.

The agreed contractual period of three months for the distribution of the film suggests that this is a cautious and exploratory attempt at distribution in Iraq by Aurora and the Baghdad agents. This is despite the fact that *Tarzan ki Beti* was a very popular film in India and also dealt with a subject that was known to be popular with audiences worldwide: jungle theme, using the star appeal of the Tarzan figure, as well as a female stunt character as its protagonist.<sup>8</sup> This would seem to suggest that Iraq was a new market for Aurora. Given that it is not known to have had a significant diasporic presence, we can speculate on the demand for

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<sup>7</sup> Contract with Messrs. Hans Raj and Sri Krishan, April 22, 1939.

<sup>8</sup> Although box office receipts from the period are not available, the Bombay film, *Toofani Tarzan* (1937), was the first of the Indian Tarzan films and had been a big hit the previous year. Its female lead, Nadia, the stunt queen from Bombay, was already a star by this time. See Rosie Thomas "Zimbo and Son Meet the Girl with a Gun," in *Living Pictures: Perspectives on the Film Poster in India*, ed. David Blamey and Robert D'Souza (London: Open Editions, 2005), 27-44.

Hindi/Urdu films in Iraq: South Asian soldiers fighting for the British army stationed in Iraq, Baghdadi Jews from India who were forging familial and/or trade ties; historical trade links between India and the Middle East leading to the presence of a small community of Indian merchants in Iraq etc. But in all, the Hindi or Urdu speaking population in Iraq would have been very small, making it primarily a non-diasporic market. Recent research confirms the pervasive presence of Hindi/Urdu cinema in non-diasporic markets.<sup>9</sup> That this request comes in 1939 from Messrs. Hans Raj and Sri Krishan suggests that even in non-diasporic markets such as Iraq the demand may have started off with the diaspora, however small it may have been. That this non-diasporic market was emerging in the 1930s is also apparent from the reminiscences of M. B. Bilimoria, recalling the “pleasant surprise” of Bombay firms when they discovered the popularity of action pictures in the late 1930s in Baghdad.<sup>10</sup> This transnational draw of popular South Asian cinema by the late 1930s will be discussed further below.

The distribution contract for *Tarzan ki Beti* in Singapore is far more detailed as compared to the one for Iraq. The Singapore distributor is R. B Matekar, and he is described in the contract as, “... a Firm carrying on business as Distributors of high class Motion Pictures.”<sup>11</sup> One is not sure how authentic or true to life this description may have been. Was Matekar a regular distributor of films or is this how he chooses to describe himself? The address given is of a location that is across the road from an area in Singapore known as Little India. Singapore had a sizeable diasporic presence and Little India is a neighbourhood that was formed by Indian immigrants who arrived and started to live in the area in the early nineteenth century. By the 1930s this was the centre of the Indian community in Singapore. Hence, the location of the distributor, even within Singapore, is rather

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<sup>9</sup> See for instance Ahmet Gurata, “The Road to Vagrancy: Translation and Reception of Indian Cinema in Turkey”, *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 1 no. 1 (2010): 67-90; Dimitris Eleftheriotis and Dina Iordanova (eds.) “Indian Cinema Abroad: Transnational Historiography of Cinematic Exchanges,” special issue of *South Asian Popular Culture*, 4 no. 2 (2006); Brian Larkin, “Bollywood Comes to Nigeria”, *Samar* 8, Winter/Spring 1997, and <http://www.samarmagazine.org/archive/article.php?id=21>; Sudha Rajagopalan, *Leave Disco Dancer Alone! Indian Cinema and Soviet Movie-going after Stalin* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> M. B. Bilimoria, “Foreign Market for Indian Films” in *Indian Talkie: Silver Jubilee Souvenir, 1931-56* (Bombay: Film Federation of India, 1956).

<sup>11</sup> Contract with R. B Matekar, 1938 [date unclear].

significant, as he was ideally placed to target the Indian community with the films he was distributing.

Matekar was given exclusive distribution rights of the film across South East Asia that included “Malaya, Straits Settlements, including Federate and Unfederated States; Dutch East Indies, including Java, Sumatra, Borneo, ? [unclear name], Billiton, Celebes, Timor, and Riau Lingga, the Lesser Sunda Islands and New Guinea, Siam, Indo-China, and Hongkong.” The distribution arrangement was for five years and a new print of the film was leased to Matekar for a minimum guarantee of Rs. 5000.<sup>12</sup>

Since Aurora already had a history of distribution in S. E. Asia it is interesting that it approaches a local distributor for its home production. It appears that Aurora was going all out to distribute *Tarzan ki Beti* by engaging locally based firms to push the film in the region. This is in stark contrast to its policy for films produced by NT and others like Patel (discussed below); however it is in keeping with Aurora’s policy on the distribution of its own films in the Madras circuit through agents and subagents. Further, this was a policy that Aurora increasingly used: thus in July 1939, Aurora handed over its 3-reel comedy *Hathe Khodi* to Empire Talkie Distributors for distribution in Calcutta cinemas, despite having its own distribution network within the city. This smacks of sound business sense as releasing the film for distribution to a competitor would ensure a wider reach for the film and could be targeted at a larger number of screens – even in the cinemas that did not have a distribution agreement with Aurora. Thus, similar to distribution arrangements in local and trans-regional circuits we see a multi-pronged approach in operation here: direct presence by distributors along with capitalising on localised networks.

There may well have been more business overseas than the extant documents seem to suggest. The piecemeal evidence in the files belies any attempt at a comprehensive narrative; yet their very presence is intriguingly suggestive and points to possible conclusions that can be drawn from it. What follows is just one

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<sup>12</sup> The contract details out 19 points over 3 pages, however page 2 is unavailable.

example of the detective work and speculative approach that has gone into the making of this thesis. A case in point concerns the obscure East Africa circuit for South Asian films. Although I have not found any direct evidence of Calcutta films circulating in East Africa in the Aurora files, or in any articles in the journals, a sole document recovered from the Majestic Theatre, Mombasa,<sup>13</sup> allows for fascinating speculation on the part of film historians. The paper lists films under production studios, presumably for publicity purposes. The majority of the films listed (10 out of the 17) on this document are unquestionably Calcutta productions and three of the six producers are major Calcutta studios: NT, Bharat Laxmi and Madan Theatres. The other three are Bombay studios: Sangit, Jayant and Minerva. Further, two of the Bombay producers had strong connections with the Calcutta industry. Sangit was Jaddan Bai's<sup>14</sup> company and both the films, *Madame Fashion* and *Call of the Heart (Hridaya Manthan)* were released in Bombay in 1936.<sup>15</sup> One of the Jayant Movitone films on the list, *Jivan Natak* (1935), was a film directed by Debaki Bose, the well-known director of *Chandidas* (1932).<sup>16</sup>

Two of the films distributed by Minerva Film Co., the third Bombay producer on this list, are Shakespeare plays, and appear to be filmed version of the stage plays rather than filmic adaptations from *Hamlet* and *King John*.<sup>17</sup> The fact that Minerva did not take care to change the names of these films strongly suggests that these were filmed versions of stage plays, possibly from the Parsi Theatre, aimed at the Gujarati audiences in Mombasa. The document lists the films in both English and Gujarati.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> I am grateful to Professor Rachel Dwyer for providing me with this document.

<sup>14</sup> Jaddan Bai is acknowledged to be the first woman music director in South Asia and one of the first women producers in Bombay. Her music recording career started in Calcutta before she moved to Bombay in the 1930s.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0415274/>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0156642/fullcredits#writers>

<sup>17</sup> *King John* is not listed in Rangoonwalla's filmography further supporting my argument that these were not films.

<sup>18</sup> Gujarati communities constituted a major part of the Indian diasporic population in Mombasa.

The Bharat Lakshmi Pictures (BLP) films on the Majestic Cinema list were all released in or before 1935,<sup>19</sup> while both the NT films are from 1936. The second NT film on the list is referred to as *Pujarin* in the official NT filmography, and not *Pujarini* as on this list. *Pujarin* is the Hindi word (literally, the woman who worships; priestess); the Bengali word for the same is *pujarini*. It is very likely that the error in the spelling of the film on the Majestic list crept in unwittingly, in the process of circulation, possibly at the hands of a Bengali clerk while preparing the documents. Since we know that Aurora was responsible for the distribution of the NT films for two years from 1935 it is quite possible that Aurora was the distributor responsible for getting these films across to Mombasa for exhibition in the Majestic Theatre, or at least networked with another distributor or local agent, as in the Singapore case and as seen in sub-continental distribution arrangements discussed in Chapter 4. Further, we also know that Aurora was distributing BLP films in the Southern territories from mid-1935 and, in the absence of further evidence, it is a reasonable assumption that Aurora was also undertaking international distribution for BLP at this time.

There is no other information available on this document and no visible evidence to suggest if it was a page from a pamphlet or a trade journal. But from the list of films it is possible to date this document between mid to late 1936 by cross-checking the release dates of the films in Calcutta and Bombay. The Majestic Theatre, Mombasa, was owned by the Savani family and, according to an online obituary, Mohanlal Kala Savani established film distribution in East Africa since 1930.<sup>20</sup>

From the Majestic cinema document one can make a considered guess that Aurora also had a presence in East Africa – either directly or indirectly through distribution agents. There is a further reason for this supposition. A Kenyan businessman, D. C. Patel, approaches Aurora for the distribution of his film entitled *India in Africa* in several territories of the subcontinent, including the

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<sup>19</sup> The films are *Balidaan* (1935, Director: Prafulla Roy, cast Ahindra Choudhury); *Diljani* (1935, Director: Charu Roy), a costume drama; and *Kunwari Vidhwa* (1935, Director: Pt. Sudarshan and Prafulla Roy), a social.

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.coastweek.com/obit/obit-41.htm>. According to this online source Savani arrived in Mombasa in 1918 just after World War I primarily as an importer and exporter of raw cotton and textiles.

eastern, southern and northern territories, as well as in S. E. Asia. This in itself is interesting as Patel already had a contract with a Bombay company, Adarsh Chitra Ltd. The initial contract between Adarsh and Patel state that this company was co-financing the film, and was also responsible for its distribution in India.<sup>21</sup> However, by November 1939, Adarsh Chitra Co. sells back their rights for all territories except Bombay to Patel. Patel, in turn, approaches Aurora for distribution of the film in the rest of the subcontinent and S. E. Asia. The question that comes to mind here is how and why did Patel get to Aurora? Is it possible that he had heard of Aurora through industry sources in Bombay, or was he aware of Aurora in Kenya through his involvement in film there? It is unlikely that the Bombay based co-financier introduced Patel to Aurora - if that were the case then Adarsh would have struck the deal with Aurora rather than selling back their rights to Patel. And, I did not come across any other reference to Adarsh in the Aurora files. Thus, one can assume that Patel directly contacted Aurora, and there is a strong possibility that he had come across Aurora in Kenya through local agents.

As the Singapore and Madras cases demonstrate, tie-ups with local distributors were a key aspect of Aurora's strategy in locations outside Aurora's direct sphere of influence. From the Aurora papers it is apparent that these networks were crucial to the functioning of the industries in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, and to their continuation as important centres of cinema. However these networks of film circulation are not quite visible from the outside even though they are very much in operation.

Aurora was not alone in its efforts at overseas distribution at this time, although its involvement has remained unknown to scholars until these documents came to light. As recent scholarship has revealed, films from India were circulating in various locations overseas even as early as the 1930s. What the discovery of the Aurora material does is to complicate this knowledge, for it clearly shows that Calcutta too was at the forefront of the transnational film business, alongside Bombay.

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<sup>21</sup> Contract between D. C. Patel and Adarsh Chitra Co., January 8, 1938, found in Aurora files.

## 5.2 GLOBAL INDIAN FILM

In recent years a fair amount of academic and media space has been devoted to the circulation of Bombay films overseas. It is well documented that Bombay cinema's global presence is not a new phenomenon but has been in process for several decades. In particular, Bombay cinema found a significant following amongst diasporic and non-diasporic populations, especially in S. E. Asia, the Middle East, East Africa, Nigeria, the Caribbean, Russia and countries in the former eastern bloc from the 1950s.<sup>22</sup> While much of this body of work addresses the globalisation of Indian cinema from the 1950s, scholars are increasingly referring to the longstanding appeal of this cinema from the 1930s. In Mishra's reminiscences of film in Fiji he recounts that a company was formed to export films to Fiji in the 1930s, but does not elaborate, while Desai also hints at the early South Asian diaspora importing films, again without elaboration.<sup>23</sup> Kaur and Sinha recognise that the international circulation of Indian cinema started in the 1930s and they cite an article in *Filmland* from 1934.<sup>24</sup> However, this discussion is not taken further and till date there has been little substantial evidence forwarded on the transnational presence of subcontinental cinema in the 1930s and no systematic study has been conducted on the area. Eleftheriotis and Jordanova too recognise the gap in scholarship and state that the general understanding is that significant international presence is only in the contemporary even though concerted efforts were made from the 1950s.<sup>25</sup> Vasudevan argues that transnational circulation of Bombay films amongst non-diasporic populations was made possible given the circulation of cultural narratives, music and performance forms across a wider Persian and Arabic culture shared between India, the Middle East, north Africa and S. E. Asia,

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<sup>22</sup> See Jigna Desai, *Beyond Bollywood: The cultural politics of South Asian diasporic film* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004); Dimitris Eleftheriotis, 'A Cultural Colony of India: Indian Films in Greece in the 1950s and 1960s', *South Asian Popular Culture* 4 no. 2 (2006): 101-112; Gurata, 'The Road to Vagrancy'; Larkin, 'Bollywood Comes to Nigeria'; Dina Iordanova, 'Indian Cinema's Global Reach', *South Asian Popular Culture*, 4 no. 2 (2006): 113-140; Kaur and Sinha, eds., *Bollyworld*; Anandam Kavoori, and Aswin Punathambekar, *Global Bollywood* (New York; London: New York University Press, 2008); Vijay Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004); Rajagopalan, *Leave Disco Dancer Alone!*; Manas Ray, 'Chalo Jahaji: Bollywood in Diaspora – in the tracks of indenture to globalization,' in Preben Kaarsholm, *City Flicks*.

<sup>23</sup> Desai, *Beyond Bollywood*, 40.

<sup>24</sup> Kaur and Sinha, *Bollyworld*, 14.

<sup>25</sup> Eleftheriotis and Jordanova, 'Indian Cinema in The World,' *South Asian Popular Culture* 4 no. 2 (2006): 80

through Urdu mysticism and musical culture. In addition, shared cultural formations between southern India and S. E. Asia led to a market for Tamil films to S. E. Asia.<sup>26</sup>

These historical studies of the global influence of Bombay cinema are still at a nascent stage and do not yet provide a comprehensive account of the range and extent of this spread. Significantly, the underlying implication of all the references to ‘Indian cinema’ is that it was Bombay cinema that made these global advances from the 1930s. However, as seen from the Aurora papers and the Majestic cinema (Mombasa) document, this assumption is not valid. This point will be developed further below.

In his mapping of Bombay cinema Bhaumik suggests that there was a significant growth in the transnational reach of Bombay cinema in the early 1930s. As evidence he cites three articles in the English language journal, *The Cinema*, published in June-July 1931 and October 1933 and claims that:

“Indeed, in this period [early 1930s] there was a substantial expansion in the overseas market for Bombay films in territories like Fiji, East and South Africa.”<sup>27</sup>

This claim of a “substantial expansion”<sup>28</sup> in the early 1930s can be contested because a closer scrutiny of the anecdotes in the journals and the industry reports suggest otherwise.<sup>29</sup> Secondly my research into the Aurora papers establishes that forays into international territories were random, even exploratory, and were based on individual networks, even drawing on personal connections rather than any organized attempt at market expansion. As discussed in the two preceding chapters circulation practices were well in place by the mid-1930s and if there had been a well-established distribution network set up overseas then the exchange with the producer of *India in Africa*, for instance, would have been more formalised than that suggested by the letters in the Aurora files. Further, the

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<sup>26</sup> Vasudevan, *The Melodramatic Public*, 206-8.

<sup>27</sup> Bhaumik, “Emergence,” 120.

<sup>28</sup> The commonplace implication of the term “substantial” is misleading in this case.

<sup>29</sup> See Rangia, *Filmland*, quoted in Kaur and Sinha, *Bollyworld*, 14; Fazalbhoy, *The Indian Film*; Bilimoria, “Foreign Market for Indian Films”; *Cinema Annual* 1933. These articles are discussed at length below.

exploratory nature of the contract with a Baghdad distributor in 1939, for a very saleable film like *Tarzan ki Beti*, for a mere three-month period, suggests that this - the Middle East - was most certainly a new territory for Aurora. Thirdly, a closer scrutiny of Bhaumik's sources in *The Cinema* also refute this claim and suggest a strong possibility of bias on the part of the authors of these articles, as they were also involved in the film business in Nairobi.<sup>30</sup>

Rather, I would propose that whilst there was a keen awareness amongst Indian film distributors of the potential of these overseas markets of diasporic communities of Indians, and there were attempts to create distribution networks in these areas, these forays could at best signal an emerging film market in the early 1930s that held the **potential** for significant expansion by Indian film distributors, rather than a "substantial expansion" of international markets as Bhaumik posits. What one can say with some degree of certainty, after scrutinising the Aurora overseas documents, is that by the end of the 1930s some markets, like S. E. Asia, were better explored by Aurora than other markets, like Iraq. Perhaps, given the proximity of S. E. Asia to Calcutta, and the fact that colonial shipping and trade routes to S. E. Asia were routed through the port of Calcutta, it is quite plausible that Aurora had recognised and built up a stronger distribution network in S. E. Asia than they had on the other side of the Indian Ocean. On the other hand, the port of Bombay was directly linked by colonial shipping routes to ports in East Africa, like Mombasa, and perhaps that is why Bombay companies were better placed than Aurora to form distribution networks in East Africa. Better placed, perhaps. But did this actually happen? We can merely speculate here as, apart from the journal articles and the Majestic cinema document, no concrete evidence of the overseas distribution network of Bombay films has surfaced till date. This premise of geographical proximity driving the establishment of networks of film circulation only partially explains why more contracts related to their distribution in S. E. Asia appear in the Aurora files; but it does not account for the full story. So, the producer of *India in Africa* approaches Aurora for distribution in S. E. Asia, even though he is contracting a Bombay company for distribution in the Bombay territory. This would seem to suggest that he contracted Aurora given its

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<sup>30</sup> *Cinema Annual*, 1933.

well-established distribution network in S. E. Asia, and since key trading routes to S. E. Asia were closely linked to the Calcutta port. However, the Aurora contract in Iraq and the Majestic cinema document subverts this premise and suggests that we cannot develop a simple explanation of the rise of transnational networks of film based on the premise of geographical proximity.<sup>31</sup> Instead, recognising the presence of networks of distribution can enable us to start arriving at a more nuanced understanding of the transnational reach of South Asian cinema in the 1930s.

My argument that overseas distribution of subcontinental films in the early 1930s merely signalled emerging opportunities for expansion rather than demonstrate significant inroads is further supported by a 1939 publication authored by Y. A. Fazalbhoy, a prominent Bombay film industry personality.<sup>32</sup> Fazalbhoy bemoans:

“Unfortunately our Film Industry has made no real efforts to study foreign developments and although our pictures do go to Africa, the Malaya States and West Indies, we have yet to see exploitation on a proper basis.”<sup>33</sup>

Fazalbhoy’s analysis of the state of the film industry contradicts Bhaumik’s claim and suggests that even as late as 1939 there was no regular distribution in these markets. Further, another industry insider, M. B. Bilimoria,<sup>34</sup> reminisces in a 1956 article that,

“... there was little effort to expand the foreign market until about 1935. A good number of Indians lived in the various parts of the British Empire. They always desired to keep in touch with their homeland for which films provided the best medium. **But there was no organised machinery to satisfy this demand....**”<sup>35</sup> [Emphasis Mine]

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<sup>31</sup> For instance, we can speculate on other possible connections that the Bombay studios on the Majestic document may have had with Calcutta. Jaddan Bai, the proprietor of Sangit Films had strong links with the Calcutta industry and the director of one of the Jayant films was Debaki Bose, whose 1932 film *Chandidas* was distributed by Aurora. These connections allow us to open our minds to the possibility that the films reached Mombasa through a Calcutta-based distributor.

<sup>32</sup> Fazalbhoy set up Photophone Ltd. in partnership with RCA and was a key equipment supplier in Bombay, and closely associated with Imperial Movietone.

<sup>33</sup> Fazalbhoy, *The Indian Film*, 100.

<sup>34</sup> M. B. Bilimoria was a partner of the Wadias, a prominent studio in Bombay, in the 1930s. Bilimoria went on to become the President of the Film Federation of India from 1957-59.

<sup>35</sup> Bilimoria, “Foreign Market for Indian Films”.

It can be argued that although the desire for finding foreign markets was conspicuous within trade circles, and is to be found intermittently through the history of feature film production in India, that desire was more of a fantasy than a reality before the mid-1940s and 1950s (see below). The dream of finding an international market was first fuelled by stories of the legendary Phalke's showing of his films in London in the teens.<sup>36</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2, the Madans had explored the possibilities of European distribution through their Italian co-productions in the early 1920s, appealing to an international market for Orientalist films, while the producers of *Sacrifice* (1927) claim that they were exploring exhibition opportunities in Britain France and Germany.<sup>37</sup> Reportedly, A. Narayanan travelled to Hollywood with prints of *Sacrifice* and Imperial's *Anarkali* (1928) to meet Carl Laemmle and explore the possibilities of American distribution.<sup>38</sup> This aspiration was also energised by the reported success of the Himansu Rai films (*Light of Asia*, *Shiraz*) in Europe, both in the mid to late 1920s.<sup>39</sup> The latter, however, were joint ventures with British and European production companies, and thus could garner some support for distribution in Europe, however marginal that may have been. Indian producers could not capitalise on these existing networks of circulation and even in the 1940s the European markets were hard to crack.<sup>40</sup>

Sporadic references to individual efforts at overseas locations are to be found from the 1930s. A handful of articles published in the early 1930s in film journals with nation-wide circulation further confirm that this foreign market was a potential one rather than established.<sup>41</sup> Bilimoria too states that the forays in the early 1930s were sporadic:

“... Occasionally a few adventurers came from Singapore or Africa or Trinidad. They had no particular interest in Indian films. To satisfy their

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<sup>36</sup> Bilimoria, “Foreign Market for Indian Films”.

<sup>37</sup> ICCE vol.1, 447-8.

<sup>38</sup> EIC, 161.

<sup>39</sup> Rangoonwalla, *A Pictorial History of Indian Cinema*, 48.

<sup>40</sup> J. B. H. Wadia's *Court Dancer* (1941), starring Sadhana Bose (Modhu Bose's wife and star of *Alibaba*) was made in three languages – Hindi, Bengali and English – the latter for distribution worldwide by Columbia Pictures. However, the war proved a dampener to this ambition and the English version was finally released in the MGM cinemas in India (i.e. Metro in both Calcutta and Bombay). See Sridhar Kshirsagar, ‘Sounding Off’ in *Cinema Vision* 1 no. 2 (1980).

<sup>41</sup> See Rangia, *Filmland*, quoted in Kaur and Sinha, *Bollyworld*, 20; *The Cinema*, 1931; 1933.

trade interest they made enquiries about Indian films and the producers gave them pictures for very nominal amounts. The producers had no idea of gaining a market; neither had the buyers the least inclination to exploit their films in their countries.”<sup>42</sup>

D. C. Patel, the Indian-origin Kenyan producer of *India in Africa*, appears to be one such “adventurer” who travelled across the Arabian Sea to Bombay, and then to Calcutta – the only difference being that he was a producer and was in search of distributors for his film in the Indian subcontinent and S. E. Asia. In fact, one of the contracts refers to Patel as “adventurer” suggesting that the term was very much in use in industry parlance and in official documents.<sup>43</sup>

Here, it is worth closely scrutinising these articles, as these are the only evidence cited by other scholars in support of the international presence of Indian cinema. In particular, the experiences of a certain N. L. Rangia reminiscing in a 1934 article on his trip to the Far East in 1931:

“Before my arrival, there were already three pictures in Strait Settlements. The first one, a Telegu talkie, *Prahlad*, which was shown not with much success; the second one was *Raja Harishchandra* (Tamil); and the third was *Nurjehan*, a silent film. At that time the Tamil talkie was being shown in Penang. Scouting my presence with films in S.S. one of these two distributors dispatched his silent film to Java lest I might reach Dutch East Indies with Indian pictures for the first time [...] In Federated Malay State, there were very few wired theatres, and that is why it was not possible for me to go there with my talkie ... Indians in S.S. and F.M.S. were really glad to see Indian films and several Indian gentlemen called on me to get some idea of the cinema business and to interest themselves in motion picture exhibition. Most of the cine theatres were under the Chinese.... These Chinese people would not agree to give more than two days for exhibition with difficulty. I secured three days in mid-week.”<sup>44</sup>

What is clear from this quote is that when we talk of the early circulation of films we cannot simply be concerned with Hindi/Urdu films, which would fall under the general understanding of Bombay cinema. Rangia’s anecdote shows that Tamil and Telegu films were in circulation in S. E. Asia before he arrived there with Hindi/Urdu films for distribution. Of course this is quite plausible because of

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<sup>42</sup> Bilimoria, “Foreign Market for Indian Films”.

<sup>43</sup> Contract between Patel and Adarsh Chitra Ltd. November 9, 1939, found in Aurora files.

<sup>44</sup> *Filmiland*, November 17, 1934 quoted in *Bollyworld*, 20.

the significant presence of Tamil and Telegu speaking communities in the Strait Settlements and the Malay Peninsula. The other notable point here is that industry players in the early 1930s were exploring distribution possibilities amongst diasporic populations, further reinforcing my argument above. We do not know how these three films reached the Strait Settlements. The silent film, *Nurjehan*, was the 1923 Madan film, produced in Calcutta.<sup>45</sup>

The Tamil film mentioned by Rangia, *Raja Harishchandra*, is not found in filmographies of 1931. However Rangoonwalla does list two Hindi films for that year - the first as *Harischandra* and the second called *Satyawadi Raja Harishchandra*. The latter has the same name as Madans' first film and it is quite possible that the Madans remade it into a talkie version. One wonders here if Rangia was mistakenly referring to one of these two films as Tamil. Rangoonwalla also lists a Tamil *Harishchandra*, but this was released in 1932 which, if correct, post-dates Rangia's recollection.

The 1931 Telegu talkie appears to be *Bhakta Prahlad*, the first sound film in the Telegu language and produced in Bombay.<sup>46</sup> The Madans also produced a Bengali *Prahlad* in 1931,<sup>47</sup> and a Telegu film called *Prahlad* in 1934,<sup>48</sup> which is the name given by Rangia. As such this 1934 Madan version could not have been the same film referred to by Rangia in the quote above, as he claims that this journey was undertaken in 1931, and thus predates the Madan *Prahlad*. In coming to this conclusion I am assuming that the dates and names in the sources are correct and that Rangia's recollection of this trip, published in 1934, as well as Rangoonwalla's sources, were accurate. However, a closer look at even this scant evidence indicates that Madan films were already circulating in S. E. Asia in the early 1930s.

That Calcutta companies and financiers were equally involved in extending their transnational film business prospects becomes evident through another example

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<sup>45</sup> I have not found any other references to another silent film of the same name.

<sup>46</sup> Rangoonwalla, *Indian Films Index*; <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0257441/>

<sup>47</sup> Nandan Directory.

<sup>48</sup> Rangoonwalla, *Indian Films Index*. In Dharamsey's silent filmography there are two silent films by the name of *Bhakta Prahlad*, both made in Bombay in 1926. See Chhabria et al., *Light of Asia*.

that has again been erroneously linked to Bombay. Van der Heide points out that the first indigenously made Malay talkie, *Leila Majnun*, was released on March 27, 1934, and directed by an Indian, B. S. Rajhans. However, Van der Heide ascribes the producer to be a Motilal Chemical Company from Bombay, owned by an Indian businessman K. R. S. Chisty<sup>49</sup> - a claim that can be contested.

Advertisements of the film in the *Malaya Tribune* in March 1934, announce that the film was produced by a “Rai Bahadur Seth Hurdutroy Motilal Chamria”, and there is no reference to Bombay in advertisements published in the week leading up to the release of the film.<sup>50</sup> Chamria a.k.a Chameria, was a well-known industrialist based in Calcutta,<sup>51</sup> a known financier of the Madans, and first encountered in this thesis in Chapter 2.<sup>52</sup> Rajhans started his career with the Madans as an actor and then as a director. Further, an entry in the English language journal, *Filmland*, on June 3, 1933 announces that,

“Seth Motilal Chameria is arranging to open a Malay Studio at Kuala Lumpur F.M.S.; probably the concern will be called the ‘Malayan Film Service’. Mr. B. S. Rajhans has been put in charge of the scheme and elaborate arrangements are being made to produce Malayan talkies there.”<sup>53</sup>

Clearly, Chameria was not only investing in an international production made solely for a foreign market (Malaya), he was also publicising this venture in the local media in India. *Filmland* was published in the English language, from Calcutta, for an all India readership. That this film is mistakenly linked to Bombay by historians and scholars of Malaya cinema is a comment on the pervasive influence of Bombay cinema in later decades and explains the

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<sup>49</sup> William Van der Heide, *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film: Border Crossings and National Cultures*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam: 2002, 124.

<sup>50</sup> Advertisements in the *Malaya Tribune*, 22-27 March, 1934.

<sup>51</sup> *Who's Who in India*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Supplement, (Lucknow: Nawul Kishore Press, 1914) in <http://www.archive.org/details/secondsupplement00luckrich>. “HURDUTROY Chamria, Rai Bahadur, Seth — born in 1881, belongs to Rajputana, his father having gone to and settled in Calcutta about 53 years ago. Seth Hardutroy started life from the early age of nine as broker and businessman and became a successful merchant after some time. Subsequently he opened firms in Hong Kong and Shanghai in China. At the present day he represents various business lines as a Banker, as a merchant, landholder, commission agent, etc., etc. He is a Municipal Commissioner and Honorary Magistrate at Howrah. He holds extensive properties in Calcutta and Howrah as also in the Districts of Monghyr and Baran and in the Kotah (Hadoti) state (Rajputana). Address: 68, Cotton Street, Calcutta.”

<sup>52</sup> *The Cinema*, August 1932, 12. *The Cinema* also uses several spellings for Chameria, including Chamria and Chamaria, over the few articles that I have come across in the 1930s.

<sup>53</sup> *Filmland*, IV, no. 156, June 3, 1933

identification of any cinematic endeavour from India as being that from Bombay. However, at the time, there was no reference to Bombay, at least in the publicity of the film in the Malayan papers. The adverts highlight the fact that this was a Malay talkie “Entirely Produced in Singapore!” and produced by Chameria.<sup>54</sup>

Why Chameria would choose to invest in a Malay film is not known, neither do we know if he continued his Malayan venture. The film was a hit and Rajhans went on to direct several other films in Singapore but these were produced by the Shaw Brothers.<sup>55</sup>

What is noteworthy is that the Rangia quote above refers to at least one Madan film (*Nurjehan*, 1923) in circulation in the Strait Settlements in 1931. One wonders here if Chameria, as a Madan financier, was merely following in the footsteps of the Madans in his Malayasian venture. That is, perhaps, there was a longer history of film circulation between Calcutta and S. E. Asia via the Madans.

Here it is worth considering the longer connections that Indian entertainment groups had with S. E. Asia via established entertainment routes. As an example, Maurice Bandmann and his theatre company regularly travelled between Singapore, the Malay states and India.<sup>56</sup> Further, circus groups like the Calcutta-based Bose’s Circus also travelled across India and to S. E. Asia in the early 1900s, and one of the young assistants touring with the circus in S. E. Asia was Jyotish Sarkar.<sup>57</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2, Sarkar then went on to train with Pathé and joined the Madans as their first cinematographer.<sup>58</sup> His involvement with Bose’s Circus further illustrates the interconnections that early cinema in South Asia had with the variety entertainment circuit. As this example highlights, those circuits are not completely rubbed off the map and continue to be explored once film production increased in Calcutta in the 1930s. These examples draw up

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<sup>54</sup> *Malaya Tribune*, March 22, 1934

<sup>55</sup> Van der Heide, *Malayasian Cinema, Asian Film*, 133

<sup>56</sup> Advertisements in *The Statesman*, Calcutta; Article in the *Weekly Sun*, Singapore, September 30, 1911

<sup>57</sup> Badhan Sengupta, *Indubala*, 268, cited in Chatterjee, *Aar Rekhona Andhare*, 27. Also see Abanindra K. Basu, *Bangalir Circus*, (Calcutta: Publicity Studio, 1936).

<sup>58</sup> Choudhury, *Nijere Haraye Khunji*, vol. I., 243-244

a strong case for the strength of the Calcutta film industry in the 1930s and its significant presence in the transnational cinema business.

Rangia presents his venture to S. E. Asia as an exploratory one, and, even if we were to take it at face value, this means that we cannot assert that Bombay companies had a significant presence, or indeed were the only ones involved in overseas distribution. Further, the contracts found in the Aurora files, and discussed above, suggest that there was considerable interest, desire and effort amongst Calcutta producers and distributors in distributing films in territories outside the subcontinent. As a case in point, Calcutta's top studio, NT, consistently produced more films in the 'non-Bengali' languages (Hindi, Urdu and Tamil) than in Bengali throughout the 1930s, with the exception of 1932 and 1937.<sup>59</sup> This, along with their distribution contracts with Aurora, clearly illustrates the studio's eagerness in extending their markets outside Bengal – across South Asia and in transnational territories.

Thus, it would be erroneous to assert that transnational circulation was simply limited to Bombay productions, or to ignore the contribution of the Calcutta companies by the use of the all-encompassing term, 'Indian cinema'. It appears that at this early stage of film circulation several producers and distributors were throwing in a stake.

The four sets of transnational distribution documents from the Aurora files, as well as the several other sources analysed above suggest a more complicated story than earlier scholarship accounts for. The evidence shows that films in several Indian languages were circulating globally in the 1930s, and this was due to the significant presence of specific linguistic communities in these locations. These films, even the Hindi/Urdu films, were produced in Bombay and Calcutta, and there is no reason to subsume these within a discussion that focuses primarily on Bombay cinema. What one can lay claim to is that, of these several languages, the Hindi/Urdu productions outnumbered the other language films given the

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<sup>59</sup> See filmography in Chakraborty, *Chalachitrer Itihase New Theatres*.

significantly larger presence of Hindi and Urdu speaking populations in Africa, the Caribbean, the Fiji Islands and in other parts of the world.

What the Aurora international contracts do suggest is that, typically, the markets sought after by the industries in both Bombay and Calcutta followed migrancy patterns with a perceived demand that was predicated on the presence of specific communities of Indians in locales across the world. This is also corroborated by both Fazalbhoy and Bilimoria in their discussions of the transnational prospects of these films. This awareness of migrancy patterns in the 1930s, and the recognition of markets that exceeded the territorial boundaries of the subcontinent is noteworthy, for this is the audience that Bollywood, as a genre of Bombay cinema, has successfully targeted from the mid-1990s to bring in considerable income from the Indian diaspora.

Thus, while Fazalbhoy supports individual explorations of international distribution in the 1930s he primarily advocates regularised expansion into these diasporic markets, rather than in England and America:

“... there is another foreign market for Indian films. There is a large Indian population in other countries in Asia and probably even some of the Eastern European countries would like to see Indian pictures as now made.”<sup>60</sup>

Here Fazalbhoy stresses on the presence of “a large Indian population” as a cornerstone for the success of foreign distribution. Fazalbhoy was an industry insider and therefore we can take this assertion as illustrative of the industry mindset in 1939. A second key, and perhaps surprising, assertion is that already in 1939 Fazalbhoy recognises a potential market in Eastern Europe, although he does not elaborate. As discussed above Bilimoria too recognises the importance and the feasibility of diasporic markets within the British Empire and laments the lack of a well-organised distribution system. Both these industry personalities acknowledge that the situation regarding overseas distribution changed in the latter half of the decade and recognise the emergence of new possibilities:

“Conditions again changed in the late thirties. Organised efforts were made by two Bombay firms to explore and exploit the market for Indian films in

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<sup>60</sup> Fazalbhoy, *The Indian Film*, 99-100.

the Middle East. It was a pleasant surprise for them to learn that popular action pictures of India were as much popular in the city of Baghdad as in any first run house of Bombay. With headquarters at Baghdad, the joint venture of the Bombay firms was able to discover a potential market for Indian films in that part of the world.”<sup>61</sup>

One could read this statement in conjunction with the Aurora contract with a Baghdad company, in 1939, regarding the distribution of *Tarzan ki Beti*. The film would fit Bilimoria’s description of a “popular action picture”. Perhaps, in its exploration of the Iraqi market, Aurora was following in the footsteps of the two Bombay firms referred to by Bilimoria above, although we are not told who these firms were. However, by this time, Indian films were moving out of diasporic markets to local audiences, as indicated by Bilimoria in the quote above. Fazalbhoy too mentions two Bombay producers who had ventured into international distribution:

“ Two producers in Bombay who are following a policy of maintaining their own distribution organisation, and which is in my opinion chiefly responsible for their financial success, have made investigations into exploitation in foreign countries and the results have been startling. Not only have they shown possibilities of much greater returns but there is room for such development that it can safely be said that if exploitation is done properly **the income from foreign markets will easily equal that from this country.**”<sup>62</sup> [Emphasis Mine]

Clearly then the value of foreign markets was by no means a discovery of the 1990s but dates back much further, from the early days of film distribution in South Asia, and explains the enthusiasm through the 1930s to establish these markets. However, trade limitations brought about by World War 2 stalled these efforts:

“... The war came and further efforts at expansion had to be suspended. But the experience gained in the pre-war days provided sufficient incentive to the exploitation of Indian films in the Middle East, Africa and the Far East. The market developed gradually but steadily and, before the independence of the country, it was estimated to bring in about 3% of the total revenue on an Indian picture.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Bilimoria, “Foreign Market for Indian Films”.

<sup>62</sup> Fazalbhoy, *The Indian Film*, 101-102.

<sup>63</sup> Bilimoria, “Foreign Market for Indian Films”.

Thus, both Fazalbhoy (1939) and Bilimoria (1956) agree that there were some efforts at distribution of Bombay films in “Africa, the Malaya States and West Indies”, however there remained much more potential. One must stress here that both Fazalbhoy and Bilimoria were speaking of Bombay producers and distributors even though they discuss Tamil and Telegu films and referred to the entire body of films as Indian. This is natural since they were both closely associated with the Bombay film industry and thus their focus, and knowledge, was primarily limited to the personnel based in Bombay. Writing with the advantage of hindsight in the 1950s, Bilimoria clearly asserts that the international market for the distribution of Bombay films was consolidated in the mid 1940s.<sup>64</sup>

Read in conjunction then these articles would suggest that significant expansion into overseas territories was only effected in the 1940s and 1950s. The question of where to place Calcutta cinema within this new history can only be answered with further and concentrated research. However, what can be said with a fair degree of certainty is that with the coming of war, both finance and raw film were scarce and by the early 1940s Bombay’s lure of money, along with the threat of Japanese invasion in Calcutta, saw an exodus of stars and directors from the city to the more lucrative shores of the western metropolis (Bombay). All of this led to a crisis in the Calcutta film industry from the early 1940s. The lethal blow was delivered with the Partition of India in 1947 when the Calcutta industry lost a large portion of its Bengali film market to East Pakistan. As discussed in Chapter 2, Bengali-speaking audiences of the talkies constituted the second largest linguistic group in pre-Partition India.<sup>65</sup> With the Partition of India, the Bengali market was divided between India and East Pakistan, with 40% of this audience lost to East Pakistan, a loss that was comparatively far greater than that suffered by the Bombay industry.<sup>66</sup> Further trade sanctions and high export-import taxes between India and Pakistan in the 1950s led to a sharp fall in film export to East Pakistan, effectively rendering the Calcutta industry handicapped.<sup>67</sup> With this

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, 59-60.

<sup>66</sup> Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, 185. Anjan Bose asserts that the Calcutta industry lost two-thirds of its audience with Partition. Interview with Anjan Bose, December 2006.

<sup>67</sup> Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, 139-140.

significant erosion of its home market the Calcutta industry was irreparably fragmented.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **PUSHING BOUNDARIES, TRAVERSING FRONTIERS**

I started this thesis by critiquing the nationalist model of the received history of 'Indian cinema' on the grounds that it does not adequately recognise the importance of the industry in Calcutta; rather it privileges Bombay, and incorporates highlights from Calcutta and Madras within the narrative of what is essentially the story of Bombay cinema. Neither does this received history recognise the complexities of the multi-layered character of the cinema in the subcontinent. Thus far this study has laid out the complex nature of the industry as it emerged in Calcutta and its singular efforts at charting out its own course, independent of, yet in conjunction with, Bombay. It also explored the multiple ways in which film interacted with the city of Calcutta and the diverse range of practices that emerged as a result of the cosmopolitan character of the city. Further, the study highlighted the prevalence of several cinemas in differentiated, multiple layered circuits in the city, including Calcutta, Bombay and Hollywood. Moreover a scrutiny of industry papers found in the files of the Aurora Film Corporation indicated the importance of distribution in extending the markets of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras productions across South Asia. In particular, Chapters 3 and 4 revealed the complex trans-regional networks of film that developed through the 1920s and 1930s cutting across territorial boundaries, while Chapter 5 brought to light the considerable presence of Calcutta films in transnational circuits in the 1930s. The study thus argued for dynamic interactions between several key centres of film across colonial India to further subcontinental and transcontinental circulation.

Circulation of film has been discussed at several levels across the thesis, from the arrival of film in Calcutta, the circulation of film within and outside the city, the trans-local networks and practices that were formed in an effort to travel out of regional boundaries and finally the intermittent crossings overseas. In the process it

has also taken note of recurrent desires voiced by several members of the industry for more consistent journeys out of the subcontinent. The thesis has also taken cognizance of the circulation of local productions, that is, Calcutta films in Calcutta and the eastern circuit; the import and circulation of Hollywood productions in Calcutta; the circulation of Bombay films in Calcutta and Calcutta films in other regions.

Further, the thesis traced the emergence of Calcutta as a major centre of film in India that was at the forefront of the emerging cinema industries of South Asia, along with Bombay. Given that Calcutta grew into a strong centre of cinema independent of Bombay, and that Calcutta cinema had a strong pan-Indian and transnational presence, it is no longer possible to characterise Calcutta cinema simply as a regional industry. This detailed exploration into the processes of film circulation defies the neat boundaries drawn up by the received model of national cinema and regional cinema. The framework of national/regional is unable to sustain the intra-regional, trans-regional and trans-national character of the cinema as we see emerging from the evidence; neither does it adequately explain the complex nature of networks that is revealed in the material under study, nor the importance of Calcutta as a major centre of film through the 1920s and 1930s.

This conceptual shift from the national/regional paradigm, with Bombay as central, Calcutta as 'regional', to the recognition of multiple centres of film in South Asia, leads me to Michael Curtin's concept of 'media capitals'. In this chapter I argue that Calcutta's importance as a centre of cinema, with active engagement and presence in the trans-regional and transnational domains, challenges its categorisation as a regional centre; instead the multi-centric approach leads us to consider Bombay, Calcutta and Madras as synchronous centres where the cinema grew and flourished as a veritable cultural institution in the early decades of the twentieth century. Given that these cities were crucial to the growth of the cinema in South Asia, I argue that the city is a more useful category to think through film history in South Asia rather than the national paradigm and use the concept of 'media capitals' to frame the findings of

this research. I conclude by asserting that Bombay, Calcutta and Madras all emerged as media capitals within the Indian subcontinent, at least in the historical moment, and then networked with each other to extend the 'cinema habit' well beyond the metropolitan centres of South Asia.

Consequently, where does this new understanding of Calcutta - as a key production centre, a vital exhibition territory, a principal importing centre in the subcontinent, and with a significant presence across and beyond the subcontinent - sit with its official labelling as a 'regional' industry? And, how do we club together this understanding with the knowledge of the multi-layered and networked character of the several film industries of colonial South Asia? Further, how does one conceptualise the local and trans-regional networks formed within the subcontinent along with the transnational networks of the cinemas of South Asia in the 1920s and 1930s? Another aspect to the problem is how to incorporate the colonial networks of circulation, through which cultural forms (theatre, variety entertainment), creative personnel and a range of screen technologies arrived in the city, within the same paradigm.

What we are seeing here is the flow of technology, cultural forms, ideas and personnel across and beyond the borders of South Asia, and an enabling, even creation, of networks on a local, national and transnational scale. The remarkable point about these exchanges, as seen in this study, is that it is not a one-way process but complex and multi-directional. That is, on the one hand, technology, cultural material and personnel arrive into Calcutta from London and Hollywood; while on the other hand films, technology and personnel move out of Calcutta into other territories (Madras, S. E. Asia etc.) resulting in a transfer of knowledge, industry practices and film aesthetic. Thus, Madan takes control over the Calcutta industry through vertical integration, in the manner of Hollywood studios, and brings over Italian directors and cinematographers who infuse orientalist spectacle into production modes that are deeply influenced by the Parsi theatre. In a separate flow Madan personnel like Rajhans take over this transcultural Madan aesthetic to

Malayan cinema, as seen in the example of the Malay *Leila Majnun* (1934). There are several such examples of travel, transfer and exchange occurring through this thesis (Bandmann is another, Aurora a third) suggesting that these transnational and transcultural encounters occur not in a deliberate, integrated manner but through several individual movements that then become processual.

In exploring the transnational journeys of Calcutta producers outside subcontinental borders, or of transcontinental arrivals of culture and technology into Calcutta, this thesis ventures into the critical domain of globalisation studies. Discourses around globalisation have deliberated on the transfer of technology, people and cultural forms, but do these adequately address the evidence discussed here, in this research?

At first glance what we have seen in this study can be considered to be aligned to globalisation discourses. Film, visual technologies, travelling exhibitors, technicians and other experts came into the subcontinent in the 1920s and 1930s in far greater numbers and with an increased regularity than at any other time before, resulting in extensive cultural influences and the transfer of knowledge, technology and cultural material. However, this research also underlines the travels and transfer of film, people and knowledge out of the subcontinent.

Early scholars of cultural imperialism have argued that globalisation has led to a one-way flow of media, personnel, ideologies etc. originating in the ‘West’.<sup>1</sup> The problem with this argument is that it disregards flows originating in non-western locations and moving in other directions, that is, within the periphery, or the opposite flow, as seen in contemporary Bollywood flows to the UK and the US. And, further, the discourse of cultural imperialism assumes that this flow from the west to the rest of the world leads to the westernisation of these societies resulting in a globalised homogenous culture; it overlooks any processes of appropriation, interpretation and reworking that

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<sup>1</sup> Oliver Boyd-Barrett, “Media Imperialism Reformulated,” in *Electronic Empires: Global Media and Local Resistance*, ed., Daya Kishan Thussu (London: Arnold, 1998), 157-76; Herbert Schiller, *Mass Communications and American Empire* (1969; 2nd rev. ed. Boulder: Westview Press, 1992); Herbert Schiller, *Communication and Cultural Domination* (New York: International Arts and Sciences Press, 1976).

commonly occur when foreign cultural material is received and adapted by another culture under changed conditions of reception.<sup>2</sup>

Further, the centre-periphery hypothesis that is central to discussions of cultural imperialism does not quite hold in the context of this research. Arguably, Hollywood was not central to the functioning of the industries in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras; rather it operated in concert with these industries. Secondly, as discussed through this thesis, Bombay and Calcutta operated concurrently as centres in the 1920s and 1930s and not within a centre-periphery structural framework.

This perception has been complicated by globalisation studies, which acknowledges that cultural flows from the 'West' are complex and not necessarily the result of premeditated and unified transfers by nation states and/or multinational corporations; rather these are messy encounters whose results cannot always be predicted. While much of the discourse on globalisation is focussed on the contemporary, not all scholars are agreed on the absolute newness of this phenomenon and trace the processes back to earlier centuries. Appadurai and others argue that global interconnectedness has existed for several centuries, resulting in the creation of cultural linkages; however these bonds were not easy to sustain given the difficulties of transportation and staying connected over long distances. These scholars argue that interactions between spatially separated groups intensified with the advent of modern technology in the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

Recent globalisation debates are able to take into account non-western media flows. A concept that has been discussed in this context is the notion of contra-flows that

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<sup>2</sup> See Ien Ang, *Desperately Seeking the Audience* (New York: Routledge, 1981); Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Fred Fejes, "Media Imperialism, an Assessment", *Media, Culture and Society* 3, no. 3 (1981): 281-9; Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz, *The Export of Meaning: Cross-Cultural Readings of Dallas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> See for instance, Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy", *Public Culture* 2 no. 2 (1990): 1-23.

refers to non-western media flows that counter the one-way information flow from the ‘West’ to the ‘East’.<sup>4</sup> The problem with contra-flows is that while it may very well be applied to contemporary Bollywood, in the historical context of the 1930s we do not see a surge of media flow from India into the ‘West’, and it must thus be discarded as a relevant notion to this study.

A more fundamental and inherent problem with the concept of contra-flows is that it acknowledges the pre-eminence of the ‘West’ as the centre, even in the process of recognising the reactive flow in the opposite direction. As Anandam Kavoori points out, the concept is problematic because it is “predicated on a set of referents – nation-state, West and the East, North and South...”<sup>5</sup>

Appadurai also rejected the one-way centre-periphery flow to suggest that, “transnational cultural flows emerge from many centres and flow into many peripheries.”<sup>6</sup> Appadurai’s concept of multi-centric media flows takes into account the flow of Hollywood films coming into India, as well as the opposite trajectories – the travel of film and the transfer of technology, knowledge and personnel from India to other parts of the world.

Iwabuchi also complicates the notion of the one-way flow from the ‘West’ by highlighting the transnational circulation of Japanese popular culture in East and S. E. Asia.<sup>7</sup> Inda and Rosaldo further propose the concept of “dislocation”, borrowed from Ernesto Laclau, to suggest that the ‘West’ has been dislocated as the sole power centre in the contemporary globalised world:

“the world, like the nation-state, has no single cultural power centre from which everything radiates. The West may have historically played this role. But this is no longer the case. The West has been displaced and now has to compete

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<sup>4</sup> Daya Kishan Thussu, ed. *Media on the Move: Global flow and contra-flow* (London: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 4

<sup>6</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular culture and Japanese transnationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

with a plurality of power centres around the world.... To think in terms of dislocation is to view the world not in terms of a monolithic core-periphery model but as a complexly interconnected cultural space, one full of crisscrossing flows and intersecting systems of meaning. It is, in sum, to view the world (and hence globalization) not as a western project but as a global one.”<sup>8</sup>

Again, while this is a compelling theory, it too is based on an acknowledgement of the eminence of the centre even in the process of rejecting the uni-directional flow from the ‘West’ to the ‘East’. Further, the internal industry exchanges, as seen from the ICCE and the Aurora archives, do not in any way suggest that Hollywood was a looming threat to the industry, and one against which local industries were reacting. Rather, the discussions in Chapter 3 highlight the importance of Hollywood in the enabling and creation of networks between the cinema industries in South Asia and thus fostered the ‘cinema habit’ and sustained the growth of the industry in several ways. Furthermore, transnational travels out of the subcontinent to Africa, S. E. Asia etc. continued independent of Hollywood flows or networks. Hollywood was thus not absent from the picture, as seen from the mapping of the cinema in Calcutta; it was present not so much as an opposition to Bombay and Calcutta but in a simultaneous co-existence. To suggest therefore that the local industries were engaged in a dislocation of Hollywood would be inaccurate; rather, the regular flow of films from Hollywood was used to build and sustain the local industries.

The concept of dislocation then does not quite address the complexities in the intra-regional, trans-regional and transnational circulation discussed in this thesis and the dynamic relationship between Hollywood flows and those between Bombay, Calcutta and Madras in the 1920s and 1930s. We must therefore stay with Appadurai’s notion of multi-centric flows that emanated from many centres and flowed into several peripheries: flows between Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, Mombasa and Singapore on the one hand, and, on the other hand, between Hollywood, London, Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and Rangoon.

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<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo, eds. *The Anthropology of Globalization: A Reader*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 29.

In effect, the networks through which Hollywood travelled in the early years were mapped onto pre-existing global cultural flows of variety entertainment. These flows into the subcontinent then aided in the creation and sustenance of internal networks of film across the subcontinent. The crucial difference here is that the external (transnational) flows out of the subcontinent in the 1930s did not necessarily follow those of Hollywood, but reveal other patterns which by-passed Hollywood and its networks. Instead, as discussed, these flows followed pre-existing circuits of colonial trade and variety entertainment, as well as colonial labour flows.

Further, all the centres of cinema in the subcontinent were located in the key colonial port cities of Calcutta, Bombay, Madras and Rangoon. These cities operated simultaneously as centres of film import, film production and film distribution in the 1920s and 1930s. Therefore, Calcutta, Bombay, Madras and Rangoon served as centres from which early twentieth century media flows emanated and criss-crossed across the respective regions, across the subcontinent and across the seas to international port cities on the colonial trade routes, just as films from London flowed across several of these locations. We are then discussing transnational flows of the cinema within the Empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries - flows that originated in, and passed through, several colonial centres across the world. This point will be taken up for further discussion below.

At this point I turn to Michael Curtin who further frames the notion of multi-centric media flows by locating these in the concept of 'media capitals'. While Curtin focusses on late twentieth century and twenty first century film, TV and new media, he actively draws on a longer history of film from the mid-twentieth century to discuss the role of 'media capitals' in the rise of transnational media. Curtin suggests that rather than a one-way flow of media from the US (centre) to the rest of the world (periphery), contemporary media originates from several cities of the world, like Bombay, Cairo and Hong Kong, and circulates transnationally, resulting in "multi-

directional media flows”.<sup>9</sup> Curtin thus builds on the notion of multi-centric cultural flows by stressing the significance of the location - the global cities in which these flows originate and the processes by which these cities become a media centre, or capital.

According to Curtin these cities are centres of transnational cultural production and function as ‘media capitals’ that exist concurrently; however some of these capitals may be more powerful than others. Furthermore, the media capitals are not fixed entities but may shift over time. In Curtin’s formulation these global cities become centres that attract creative people and resources that become the bedrock on which global media is produced, nurtured and disseminated.

Location thus returns as a central notion yet, unlike in theories of media imperialism and contra-flows, media capital does not privilege any one location (the West; Hollywood) and is able to incorporate the plurality of the concept of multi-centric flows. Curtin thus moves beyond the traditional centre-periphery model to offer a new model of conceptualising transnational media flows to ask, why do certain places become centres that engender the growth of media that then circulate transnationally? What are the characteristics of these sites that lead to the production of transnational media? Curtin’s conceptualisation thus shifts the stress to the sites of production, and away from the processes by which global media circulate. These sites of production, Curtin argues, are synonymous with global cities, and therefore the city, and its characteristics, become key to the production of global media.

Media capitals, Curtin explains, operate according to three principles: “(1) a logic of accumulation, (2) trajectories of creative migration, and (3) forces of sociocultural variation.”<sup>10</sup> To explain these three principles Curtin uses the example of Hollywood, historically the most stable and powerful media capital in the world. In drawing on

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Curtin, *Playing to the World’s Biggest Audience: The Globalization of Chinese Film and TV* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). Also see Curtin, “Media capital: Towards the study of spatial flows,” in *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 6 no. 2 (2003): 202-228.

<sup>10</sup> Curtin, *Playing to the World’s Biggest Audience*, 10.

Hollywood as an example, and using this to discuss the rise of global Chinese film and television in the media capitals of S. E. Asia, Curtin implies that the notion is tenable even in the historical context. Here I argue that Curtin's concept of media capital, with its stress on global cities and its ability to incorporate a plurality of centres, is the most appropriate model to frame my own research on film in Calcutta up until 1939.

Here, it is worth considering each of Curtin's three criteria with reference to early twentieth century Calcutta. Curtin argues that the first principle of media capital is "a logic of accumulation" which is achieved through dual means – a concentration of productive resources, and an extension of markets - which he terms the centripetal and centrifugal forces of capital respectively. As seen, Calcutta was one of the largest production centres in the subcontinent in the silent and early talkie period. The Madans were the first to concentrate productive resources in the silent era through integrating their theatre and film businesses, and creating a vertically integrated studio that employed a large number of people. In addition, control over a wide circulation network ensured a pan-South Asian market for their films. This concentration of productive resources by means of a regular production cycle and an assured circulation through a vertically integrated business allowed Madan Theatres to become the dominant South Asian film studio in the silent era. With the fall of the Madans, removal of monopoly control, and the infusion of new capital, new Calcutta studios in the late silent and early talkie era were able to integrate labour, capital and creative resources to move towards regular production, offering a range of genres to create a strong, stable production centre in Calcutta. These studios produced films in multiple languages and accessed distribution networks to ensure local, trans-regional and transnational circulation. The high level of import of foreign film through Calcutta additionally induced local importers to extend their distribution net across South Asia to gain high returns. This dual logic of accumulation allowed Calcutta to become a key centre of film in South Asia. The Aurora papers further suggest that other key centres of production and film import also functioned in similar capacities. This synchronic rise of multiple centres of film across South Asia, and their need to

develop a symbiotic relationship to extend their individual markets, created the conditions for the growth of a distribution network across South Asia.

Curtin's second principle of media capital, "trajectories of creative migration", is particularly true of Calcutta. Curtin argues that while pre-industrial patronage sparked creative migration to specific locations in the pre-modern era, with industrialisation and the building of performance venues, art galleries etc., creative labour migrated to modern cities like Berlin, New York and Shanghai.<sup>11</sup> As the cultural capital of colonial India, Calcutta can be added to this list. As discussed in chapter 1, Calcutta was already a hub of colonial-transnational performance circuits and had developed into a major cultural centre of South Asia by the time cinema arrived in the city. This institutionalised and wide-ranging culture of public entertainment, along with a nascent music industry in the city, was able to attract creative talent from across South Asia, and indeed the world, by the early 1900s. Given Madan Theatres' ability to provide regular work and hand out regular salaries as one of the largest theatre and film producers in colonial India, it too attracted a wide range of creative talent to Calcutta from across the subcontinent including writers, actors, directors and musicians. Later, in the studio era, New Theatres and East India Film Company also caused large numbers of talent to migrate to the city. Even a comparatively smaller studio like Aurora was able to draw creative labour from Madras, Lahore et al, in being able to offer sound-ready production facilities, capital and a distribution net. This clustering of creative labour in Calcutta generated ample opportunities for the cross-fertilisation of ideas, modes and creative practices, stimulating learning and innovative production; further reiterating Calcutta's position as a media capital. Thus, through the 1920s and 1930s, the city witnessed continued subcontinental and transcontinental migration of creative labour coming to work in the cinema and music industries. The tide turned towards the end of the 1930s when Bombay's superior financial power, along with other socio-political factors, led to a creative migration away from the Calcutta studios.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 14-15.

Thus, Curtin contends, while the “centripetal logic of accumulation and of creative migration” allows specific cities to emerge as centres of media the “centrifugal patterns of distribution” complicates this, especially under different cultural conditions of reception. Curtin elucidates with his example of Hollywood and he stresses the significance of cultural difference between Hollywood films and their reception by Turkish or Indian audiences. With this he arrives at the third principle of media capital - “forces of sociocultural variation”. Curtin argues that socio-cultural variations encourage the growth of media industries within different cultural milieus – Cairo, Bombay etc., which strike a more immediate chord with local audiences and are, therefore, able to compete with more powerful global media industries like Hollywood.<sup>12</sup>

This third principle is thus able to accommodate the presence of multiple media capitals across the world that survive and flourish despite stiff competition. Curtin uses this factor to demonstrate the prevalence of local and national industries despite Hollywood’s hegemonic presence worldwide. While this is also true of South Asia in general, this principle can additionally be used to explain the synchronic presence of several media capitals within South Asia. Further, as discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, the Calcutta industry (along with the industries in Bombay, Madras etc.) had been able to incorporate films produced elsewhere within its rubric by developing institutional practices that catered to differentiated audiences present in the city. Additionally, it made use of this very same principle to extend the market to other distribution territories within and outside the subcontinent.

Hence, Curtin’s concept of media capital within the contemporary world is also a useful frame within which to study early cinema in Calcutta and South Asia as a whole:

“The concept of media capital encourages us to provide dynamic and historicised accounts that delineate the operations of capital and the migrations

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 18-19.

of talent and at the same time directs out attention to forces and contingencies that can engender alternative discourses, practices and spatialities.”<sup>13</sup>

This dynamic correlation between location, history and the rise of transnational media is a significant addition to the debate and allows for alternative spatial imaginings of transnational media, including the historical examples discussed in this thesis. It is possible, through this framing, to complicate the national/regional paradigm of ‘Indian cinema’ and, indeed, theorise early cinema in the subcontinent beyond national imaginaries and spatialities, and to recognise the significance of global cities like Calcutta and Bombay as central to the rise of cinema in South Asia. Acknowledging the synchronous presence of several media capitals allows us to give credence to historical processes, to take cognisance of specific local conditions and to consider the intersections of the local, national and transnational within one framework.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, as a key trading port, gateway to the eastern circuit within the subcontinent, and with established transport and communication links to S. E. Asia through land and sea routes, Calcutta offered an abundant and diverse market into which films, technology and skill migrated from all over the subcontinent and the world. Thus showmen like Bandmann, technicians like Deming, multinational corporations like the Gramophone Company, Pathé, MGM etc. were drawn to Calcutta. The city, with its peoples and its manifold traditions of cultural production, was fertile ground to nurture a robust local industry, which in turn attracted more creative talent from all across South Asia. The resultant cosmopolitanism led to the formation of a complex, layered industry in the city. And Calcutta’s centrality within global trade and cultural circuits made it an expansive market that offered myriad opportunities for extending out of the region, thereby drawing in local and global capital, and making it a media capital into and out of which media, people, technologies, resources etc. flowed. It was this capacity to operate with the “dynamics of accumulation, agglomeration and

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>14</sup> Curtin also acknowledges that through this approach he hopes to bridge the supposed divide between political economy and cultural studies. A thorough discussion on this is beyond the scope of this thesis.

circulation”<sup>15</sup> that allowed Calcutta to function as a media capital until the late 1930s, with intricate regional, subcontinental and transnational networks.

The concept of media capital then allows us to expand the canvas to incorporate the global cities of South Asia, plugged into local and transnational circuits of cultural exchange and communication. This is the route Curtin takes to understand the expanse of transnational Chinese media today as well as contemporary global media flows originating in Bombay, Cairo and Hong Kong; and, equally, this is a paradigm that helps me to address the multiple circuits of film in South Asia in the early twentieth century, as well as to discuss the dynamic associations between the media capitals of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras:

“...we commonly study television as a national phenomenon. What if we were to shift our attention to the study of *media capitals*, seeing them as bound up in a web of relations that exist at the local, regional and global levels, as well as the national level? Such a suggestion is anticipated in recent research, for example, in David Morley’s (2000) analysis of the electronic landscapes of Europe, Joseph Straubhaar’s (1997) approach to multicentric media flows, and Marie Gillespie’s (1995) explorations of audience uses of Bombay film videos in Punjabi neighborhoods of London. These and other studies urge us to see the nation as an important but not sufficient site of media analysis....

“On the other hand, the concept of media capitals portrays cities like Hong Kong as positioned at the intersection of complex patterns of economic, social and cultural flows. A media capital is a nexus or switching point, rather than a container....”<sup>16</sup>

This notion of media capital as a “nexus” allows us to position the city at the centre of any conceptualisation of transnational media flows and does not privilege any one directional flow over another. Thus, the flow of early Hollywood films to other media capitals need not be privileged over the media flow from Calcutta to Singapore and the specificities of both these (and other) flows can be studied without positing one against the other, or contradicting each other, as the notion of contra-flows would suggest.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>16</sup> Curtin, “Media capital: Towards the study of spatial flows,” in *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 6 no. 2 (2003): 204.

Film therefore emerged from New York, Paris, London, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and flowed into several peripheries. In turn several of these cities became media capitals in their own right from which films flowed into many other peripheries. Bombay was one such centre in South Asia; Calcutta was another, Madras a third. In this instance the boundaries of centre and periphery become blurred. Hollywood films flow out of these centres into adjoining territories and into the other centres. Thus Hollywood films imported by the Madans through the Calcutta port travelled across South Asia while those imported by Bombay travelled all the way to Rangoon, via Calcutta. Similarly, Hollywood films imported by Madras companies came into Calcutta and thence to Rangoon, while Hollywood films imported by Calcutta companies went into Madras and from there across the southern circuit. This practice was rampant in the late 1920s and continued into the 1930s. Thus the territory of India, a peripheral market for Hollywood, in turn consisted of several media capitals from where Hollywood films were sent off within the region. The binary of centre-periphery is hence rendered meaningless, or, rather, our understanding of centre and periphery is substantially altered, seen from a transnational lens.

Consequently, the acceptance of multicentric media flows (Appadurai) along with the paradigm of media capital (Curtin), allows us to understand the complex crisscrossing of media forms, personnel, technology, skills, knowledge and information within the eastern circuit, between the several subcontinental circuits, between Calcutta and Madras and Hollywood, between Calcutta and Bombay and Mombasa - all within the same framework. Thus, it is no longer surprising that Bombay and Calcutta were equally significant as centres of media production and circulation; neither is it surprising that media flows originating in either or both of these media capitals were not necessarily confined within subcontinental borders but travelled to other parts of the world, and that their knowledge, skill and media forms were sought after in other locations across the world. By the same token, the media capital paradigm is also able to accommodate the circulation of people like Maurice Bandmann through several

sites in north Africa, India and S. E. Asia – that is across several sites positioned on colonial circuits of the British, French and Dutch Empires.

This brings us to another facet of these networks. Earlier I had argued that transnational flows out of the several ports in India were not predicated on Hollywood; I now suggest that these trajectories were contingent on the commercial trade routes created by Empire. Trade routes and networks created out of the necessities of Empire led to the flow of media, culture, personnel, ideologies, capital not only into the media capitals within India, but also outwards from these media capitals to other locations in Africa and S. E. Asia, as evinced by the Aurora papers.<sup>17</sup> All the locations to which films travelled from Calcutta, Bombay and Madras in the 1930s, that we see emerging from the evidence, were places that were intrinsically connected through the colonial networks of the British Empire, and in all cases through diasporic networks.

It was, after all, the links with the colonial army that paved the way for J. F. Madan to import films into Calcutta, screen them in cantonment cinemas, and from thence across the subcontinent, thus becoming the first media mogul to establish a media empire in South Asia. It was the need to sustain Empires that led to the establishment of global shipping routes and saw the rise of many of the port cities under discussion as transnational cosmopolitan trading centres with strong urban agglomeration. As discussed, people, commodities, ideologies crisscrossed across these routes. Itinerant showmen and film exhibitors followed these routes and arrived at these locations, initially to entertain the European diaspora, and subsequently the locals, thereby establishing new markets.<sup>18</sup> It was also the need of the Empire that saw the building of global communication networks that speeded up information flow between the colonies, and it was the Empire that aided the rise of the first multinational companies, as well as their agents, that traded in markets around the world. It was

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<sup>17</sup> Ravi Vasudevan points out the importance of the British empire in colonial labour flows that created foreign markets for Indian films. Vasudevan, *The Melodramatic Public*, 208.

<sup>18</sup> “Early Cinema in Calcutta”, unpublished paper presented in the Indian Cinema Symposium, University of Westminster, June 2008.

also the Empire's need to promote specific ideologies and safeguard against others that led the colonial administration to form the Empire Marketing Board, which simultaneously sought to protect colonial territories for British films and fight the competition from Hollywood. And it was the networks of the British Empire that led to the migration of people from the Indian subcontinent, to Africa, S. E. Asia and the Caribbean. Sometimes these migrations were forced (indentured workers to Fiji and the Caribbean); sometimes they were caused by the necessities of trade. Regardless of the initial reasons, it led to the formation of a transnational South Asian diaspora that became the consumers of 'Indian cinema' in the 1930s and thereafter.

Further, while it is true that the sites mapped out by the Aurora contracts are located on the shores of the Indian Ocean, I prefer to use the term Empire Trade Network, rather than the 'Indian Ocean World' – a term that has come into current academic usage, as a more relevant term for this research, as the Empire was crucial to the processes and connections dealt with here. Further, the locations do not include all of the Indian Ocean World but specific parts of it. The territories identified in the contracts were located primarily within the British Empire. So, The Philippines for instance, which was under Spanish and American rule, are not within the purview of this nascent distribution network despite the fact that the islands were located next to the territories under consideration. On the other hand, the spaces enumerated in the contracts were all connected, through trade undertaken by the British East India Company. The only exception appears to be the Dutch East Indies, which was not a British, but a Dutch, colony; however there exists a longer history of trade association between southern India and the areas that were designated the Dutch East Indies in the late nineteenth century. Further, the Caribbean, referred to by Fazalbhoy, which was also a regular space for the export of films from India (although not discussed in this thesis), is not part of the Indian Ocean World. The common factor that binds all of these spaces together then is that they were connected by the Empire and also had large populations of Indian migrants - migrancy patterns that were contingent on the British Empire.

Thus the Empire Trade Network, as a conceptual term, is able to bring under its rubric the journeys of film and the processes and networks that have been discussed thus far. This conceptual category is also able to take into account the Madan film trade, which was instrumental in creating the transregional distribution and exhibition net across the Indian subcontinent, first of foreign film and then their own productions. As discussed above, J. F. Madan was very much a trader of the Empire, whose primary business was the import and supply of goods to colonial garrisons across the subcontinent. Furthermore, this term encapsulates the arrival of film, materials, technologies and personnel from Europe, as well as the arrival of earlier cultural forms like the theatre and variety entertainment, discussed in the thesis.

Empire made borders and boundaries porous, although not necessarily easy to traverse, to aid the transnational flow of capital, people and commodities that was essential to sustain it. While the colony was in existence the borders needed to remain open to enable effective administration and continue the connection with the colonising state as well as between the colonies.<sup>19</sup> This was certainly the case with the British Empire, and was especially true of India - a large colony that also functioned as a base that supported the administration in neighbouring colonies in Asia and Africa. Thus shipping and, from the latter half of the nineteenth century, telecommunication networks within the Empire were increasingly linked. With the formalisation of independent nation-states borders became fixed, with limited and controlled access, making border crossings intractable. Cinema markets for both Bombay and Calcutta were cut off, especially so in the case of Calcutta where the creation of East Pakistan in 1947 eroded vast portions of the primary market of the Calcutta industry.

That the cinema traversed the so-called boundaries of the nation was inevitable because commercial and cultural flows followed the logic of Empire trade and its routes, not the logic of the nation. The paradigm of national cinema thus becomes a

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<sup>19</sup> Vasudevan, *The Melodramatic Public*, 208. Also see Vasudevan, "Geographies of the Cinematic Public: Notes on Regional, National and Global Histories of Indian Cinema." *Journal of the Moving Image* 9 (2010), [http://www.jmionline.org/jmi9\\_6.htm](http://www.jmionline.org/jmi9_6.htm).

retroactive imposition on the cinema in South Asia in the 1920s and 1930s. This approach to the cinemas of colonial South Asia, seen through the lens of media capital, allows for a multi-centric conceptualisation of film in India – an insight that is untenable within a national cinema paradigm, which has invariably tended to focus on Bombay as the only centre of film in India. Perhaps this reading stemmed from taking note of the larger number of films emanating out of Bombay, leading to the assumption that it was always at the forefront; or Bombay's ability to attract larger volumes of capital; or from the creation and use of language-based filmographies, based on the assumption that all Hindi/Urdu films were produced in Bombay.

As the discussion of the Aurora papers makes clear, Bombay's primacy in the early decades of the cinema is arguable, and focussing on Bombay as the centre reveals only a fraction of the picture. As we see from the 1917 article in *The Times of India*, quoted in the prologue to this thesis, such assumptions can no longer be accepted unquestioningly. In addition, going beyond the national framework allows us to look beyond geographical boundaries at the transnationalisation of early cinema, beyond the formulation of Calcutta cinema simply as Bengali cinema, and beyond the top end of film circulation into the complex layers of the B circuit and the junk film trade, to study the processes by which the continued circulation of older prints through these secondary layers and networks were crucial to the sustenance of the cinema as a whole.

Further research into the configuration of these layers in the other media capitals will help us to draw a more detailed understanding of early circulation in South Asia. Additional archival research in Madras can fill out the picture of Aurora's activities in the southern circuit and help to study the shifting terrain of trans-regional circulation in the 1940s. Further exploration of the foreign circuits in East Africa and S. E. Asia is also needed, along with more specific research into the Madan empire, to augment this and other current scholarship. My initial foray into the dynamics of early film culture and colonial networks in Calcutta can also be pursued further, to supplement

the understanding of the early decades of film in Calcutta and explore its place as a vibrant media capital in the early twentieth century.

This study thus develops a unique insight into transcontinental networks of cinema developed in its first few decades and induces us to look at the regional, subcontinental and transnational as a continuum rather than as separate spheres. As I argue, looking at these three fields as separate categories for the study of film inhibits us from understanding the full scale of film circulation - both its geographical extent and its social penetration - and prevents us from seeing connections and continuities that enabled the rise of cinema as the dominant and enduring cultural institution of the twentieth century. While the travels of film from one sphere to another may have been guided, controlled and regulated, in essence the connections and exchanges allowed the cinema in all three spheres to flourish and expand. This methodological approach underpins this study – an approach that has revealed the intricate networks and practices of trans-regional and transnational flows of South Asian cinemas (Hindi/Urdu, Tamil, Telegu and Bengali) and processes by which the many cinemas of India emanating out of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, in particular, grew into sustainable industries by the 1930s, and took the first steps towards becoming a transnational phenomenon that went on to operate parallel to Hollywood in later decades. These wider networks may have continued to elude the gaze of the TOI columnist in the 1930s, much as the Phalke films had done in 1917, but by 1939 the TOI is forced to acknowledge that the rapid spread of the cinema habit “can only be described as phenomenal.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *The Times of India*, May 1939.

**APPENDIX 1:**

**PERMANENT CINEMAS IN CALCUTTA: CHOWRINGHEE CINEMAS**

<b>NAME</b>	<b>YEAR</b>	<b>LOCATION</b>	<b>OWNED/ MANAGED BY</b>	<b>OTHER NAMES</b>
Corinthian	19 <sup>th</sup> Century Stage	5 Dharmatalla Street	Madan from c.1890s	Opera Cinema (1971)
Electric Theatre	19 <sup>th</sup> Century Stage	4 Corporation Street	Madan	Albion (1920s)/ Regal (1931)
Elphinstone Picture Palace	1907	5/1 Chowringhee Place	Madan	Minerva (1969)/ Chaplin
Empire Theatre	1908	4 B Chowringhee Place	Arratoon Stephen/ Maurice Bandmann	Empire Palace of Varieties/ Roxy
Globe	19 <sup>th</sup> Century Stage	7 Lindsay Street	Various  Du Casse (Oct. 1920 – 1922)  Globe Theatres, 1922 onwards, managed by N. C. Laharry	Opera House/ Grand Opera House (19 <sup>th</sup> C)/  The Bijou Ltd. (Oct. 1920)
Lighthouse	1938	2 Humayun Place	? Humayun Theatres Ltd.	

NAME	YEAR	ADDRESS	OWNED/ MANAGED BY	OTHER NAMES
Metro	1935	5 Chowringhee Road	MGM	
New Cinema	1931	171 Dharmatalla Street	New Theatres	
New Empire	Pre-1935	1 Humayun Place	Bandmann Varieties Ltd.	New Empire
Paradise	c. 1935	39 Bentinck Street	East India Films/ Radha Films	
Pearl		32 Dharmatalla Street	Mrs. Sorabjee (c. 1929 onwards)	Jyoti Cinema
Picture House	? late teens?	19 Chowringhee Road	Site owned by Arratoon Stephen in 1890s Du Casse in late teens ? Paramount in 1930s	Gaiety Theatre  Tiger
Theatre Royal	19 <sup>th</sup> Century Stage	Grand Arcade, Chowringhee Road	Site owned by Arratoon Stephen	Burnt down in 1911

### PERMANENT CINEMAS IN CALCUTTA: INDIAN TOWN

NAME	YEAR	LOCATION	OWNED/ MANAGED BY	OTHER NAMES
Chitra	1930	83 Cornwallis Street	New Theatres	
Cornwallis	Late teens	138 Cornwallis Street	Madan P. Ganguly of Kali Films (1936 onwards)	Sree (1936)
Crown	Mid - Late teens	138/1 Cornwallis Street	Madan P. Ganguly of Kali Films (1935 onwards)	Uttara (1935)
Curzon Theatre	19 <sup>th</sup> C Stage	College Street		Alfred Theatre/ Grace Cinema
Imperial theatre		Barabazaar	Madan	Moonlight Cinema
Ripon Theatre		College Street		
Rupabani	?1933?	76/3 Cornwallis Street	P. Ganguly of Kali Films ?	

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