



PROJECT MUSE®

---

A Specter Haunts Bombay: Censored Itineraries of a Lost  
Communitistic Film

Debashree Mukherjee

Film History: An International Journal, Volume 31, Number 4, Winter 2019,  
pp. 29-59 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/748821>

## A Specter Haunts Bombay: Censored Itineraries of a Lost Communist Film

**ABSTRACT:** This article situates a lost film titled *Mill or Mazdoor* (1934/1939) and its history of proscription at the intersection of three arguments: (1) that the loss of the film artifact should not preclude attempts for historiographic engagement and interpretation; (2) that site-specific histories of film censorship tell a significant story about the meanings and emotions generated by a film; and (3) that the repeated return of the censored, proscribed, or lost film complicates approaches to origins, authorship, and provenance. Through archival research, analysis of publicity materials, and engagement with scholarship on film censorship, urban and industrial history, and geography, I embed the story of *Mill* within a dense history of local industrial unrest, transnational fears of filmic communism, and wranglings with a colonial censor regime. The singular travails of a proscribed film thus embody the stories of a specific place whose specificity is wrought out of its links with other places in the world.

**KEYWORDS:** censorship, communism, India, lost films, archives, colonialism, labor, Bombay, film historiography

On June 3, 1939, a film with the dual-language title, *The Mill or Mazdoor* premiered in Bombay city. It was a highly anticipated film, written by the acclaimed Hindi novelist Munshi Premchand and directed by Mohan Bhavnani, a veteran filmmaker. The film's story was extremely topical—a love story between a mill-owner's daughter and a trade-union leader that presented a romantic solution to Bombay's decades-long labor agitations against the powerful textile industry (fig.1). The film was shot on location at Bombay's Hansraj mill and promised realistic footage of workers' rallies and strikes. An advertisement in the *Bombay Chronicle* newspaper claimed that “for the first time on the Indian screen” there was to be a “picture dealing with the lives of 2 lakhs [200,000] of citizens of Bombay.”<sup>1</sup> Even though *Mill* was released in Bombay city in 1939, all available records suggest that *Mill* had its official theatrical release in 1934. How can the



**Fig 1:** Song booklet cover for *Mill or Mazdoor* (1934/1939). Note the scenes depicted on the lower left, which recur in fig. 7.

annals of Indian cinema predate a film by five years? What part of the story are we missing here?

I must admit now that I have set the stage with a false problem; *Mill* had indeed been released in British India in 1934, except not in Bombay Presidency, the administrative region where it was produced. The film was repeatedly proscribed and modified by the Bombay Board of Film Certification (BBFC) from 1934 to 1939 on the grounds that Bombay city's current industrial climate made it necessary to prevent its release. *Mill* was not available for Bombay audiences to view for five years after its initial release, and notably, the film has once again done the disappearing act—it is considered a lost film today. This lost status itself is quite unexceptional given that at least 95 percent of all Indian films released in the two decades between 1931 and 1949 are missing from the National Film Archive of India (NFAI).<sup>2</sup> But the film historian can nonetheless call on the ghosts of films lost and attempt a reconstruction of their content and trajectory through multiple filmic and nonfilmic paratexts.

In this article I situate *Mill* and its history of proscription at the intersection of three arguments: (1) that the loss of the film artifact should not preclude attempts at historiographic engagement and interpretation; (2) that site-specific

histories of film censorship tell a significant story about the meanings and emotions generated by a film; and (3) that the repeated return of the censored, proscribed, or lost film complicates approaches to origins, authorship, and provenance. Following cultural geographer Doreen Massey, I suggest that the move to localize also has the capacity to reveal “the openness of localities,” that is, “the necessary interdependence of any place with others.”<sup>3</sup> Through archival research, analysis of publicity materials, and engagement with scholarship on film censorship, urban and industrial history, and geography, I embed the story of *Mill* within a dense history of local industrial unrest, transnational fears of filmic communism, and wranglings with a colonial censor regime. The linked history of a film and its place of censorship points to tensely localized fears of proletarian mobilization in the textile mills of 1930s Bombay. At the same time, the paranoia about communistic films was palpable also in the US and England, drawing *Mill* into a larger story about cinema and mass mobilization that was to define the Cold War era. The singular travails of a proscribed film thus embody the stories of a specific place whose specificity is wrought out of its links with other places in the world.

## LOST FILMS IN THE CENSOR ARCHIVE

Of the approximately 3,270 sound feature films released in India between 1931 and 1949, only 146 films are listed in the catalogue of the NFAI.<sup>4</sup> Film prints have been lost in accidental studio fires, through industry neglect and deterioration, or by deliberate recycling to extract silver from the nitrate base.<sup>5</sup> There is a slim chance that some of these lost films have survived in archives and distribution offices in East Africa or other parts of the world where diasporic audiences made early transnational film commerce possible. But for all practical purposes, we have to contend with irreversible material loss as we write our histories.

If film scholars are interested in what films mean, then tracking a lost film can help us understand a vital part of its meaning in places that spatially and temporally exceed the film object itself, its moment of screening, or the act of viewership. Cinematic meaning circulates via paper, too, and this becomes especially evident when we track itineraries of film censorship.

Early scholarship in Indian cinema approached censorship as a strictly repressive instrument that furthered the state’s ideological agenda and revealed its disciplinary paternalism.<sup>6</sup> More recently, as I will discuss later in this article, scholars have focused on the affective and generative meanings of censorship. To this body of scholarship, I would like to add another approach to censorship: as a productive material site for the study of lost things, such as films. The abundance of detail available to the film historian in colonial records of censorship and proscription is astonishing. In the context of colonial India,

the sheer size of the British bureaucratic machinery resulted in a dense paper trail of attitudes, opinions, material cuts, and social networks of influence.<sup>7</sup> Correspondence between administrative officials, ostensibly incriminating evidence from newspaper advertisements and popular film reviews, petitions from film producers, additional petitions from other interested parties such as religious organizations, political groups, or business elite, all jostle for priority within the archival censor file. In the case of *Mill*, what emerges from the proliferation of letters between state actors, Indian power brokers, and the film's weary producers, is, of course not the film itself. Rather, several versions of *Mill* emerge, some of which are lost to us today and some which never saw the light of day. Each of these is an iteration of something we might have called the original *Mill*, but by their very presence in the censor record these versions complicate our quest for the original. The censor file transforms absence into unwieldy presence, as multiple *Mills* appear and disappear along the paper trail, and the film historian's mandate is rendered fraught from the outset.

Film production emerged in India under the shadow of British colonialism, and film censorship was a colonial bequest to independent India's multiple film industries. As a mechanism for the surveillance of cinema and social affects, censorship was officially instituted in 1918 with the Cinematograph Act, and its chief legacy has been to position India's film audiences as vulnerable subjects of a paternalistic state. In 1920, separate censor boards were established in the port cities of Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, and Rangoon, while the Lahore censor board was instituted in 1927. These boards were charged with the task of viewing new local releases and international imports and certifying films that were deemed "suitable for public exhibition."<sup>8</sup> The parameters for public suitability ranged from moral codes on indecency to content that could inflame religious or racial sentiment. An exhibition certificate granted by any of the independent censor boards was applicable across British India, but if a film's certificate was revoked by a local board it would be banned only in that particular province. Initially, these regional censor boards "worked without specific guidelines for evaluating films" but later adopted the basic tenets of the British Board of Film Censors' guidelines.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, evaluative criteria varied greatly from one board to another. We now start to understand how *Mill* could have been released in Lahore in 1934 but remain proscribed in Bombay till 1939, even though both were presidency towns under the centralized governance of the British colonial regime.<sup>10</sup>

Annual records of the Bombay Board of Film Certification's (BBFC) activities give us a list of films that were banned or refused certification in Bombay Presidency. Censorship records contain synoptic notes on reasons for proscription, such as perceived slights to British prestige, offense to religious sentiments,

or displays of excessive violence. The 1930s, however, mark a striking phase in the history of colonial censorship as a new justification for proscription announces itself—the recurrence of so-called communistic themes. Within the spectral history of lost films, we now glimpse another, more familiar specter, the specter of communism that haunted Bombay in the interwar years.

*Mill* appears in the censorship records in multiple instances and avatars. The production company, Ajanta Cinetone, first submitted an application for censor certification on September 28, 1934. On October 1, the censor-inspector watched the film, and a second screening was organized for the Board of Censors on October 5, where the members recommended certain modifications. A revised second version was reexamined by the board on October 23 and within two days, on October 25, the BBFC secretary wrote to Ajanta Cinetone announcing that “my Board is of the opinion that the general theme of the film is not suitable for presentation in Mill areas in the Bombay presidency at the present moment and that it is, therefore, not prepared to consider the certification of this film for at least six months.”<sup>11</sup>

What was so unsuitable about *Mill*? We can construct an outline of the plot based on available reviews, publicity materials, and censorship records. The diegesis begins with a textile mill owner, Seth Hansraj, on his death bed. He has a dutiful daughter, Padma, and a profligate son, Vinod, who is only interested in spending his father’s money on women, gambling, and alcohol. In a “thoroughly unorthodox” move, Seth Hansraj leaves the factory and its management to both siblings as equal partners.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, the mill workers are getting restless. Their wages have been cut, hours have been increased, and retrenchment threats loom large. Already dissatisfied with factory conditions, the workers are further aggravated by the “highhandedness of the Manager,” in cahoots with the authoritarian Vinod. Padma falls in love with a mill worker, Kailash, and in solidarity with the demands of the mill workers she “lead[s] the workers into a peaceful strike against her own brother.”<sup>13</sup> The plot overtly advocates for peaceful methods of proletarian agitation, and Kailash and Padma’s love relationship serves as an obvious metaphor for improved capital-labor relations. But the BBFC, in 1934 and 1935, was not concerned with the peaceful compromise achieved in the climax. Rather, the censors were agitated by specific acts of violence and villainy directly represented or diegetically implied in the film. Causing particular unease were “suggestions and scenes of procurement or seduction of mill women by the manager or owner of the mill” and “suggestions of the employment of hirelings to attack the strikers.”<sup>14</sup> Now, the portrayal of the capitalist mill owner as a debauched sex offender was of a piece with contemporaneous social melodramas about village landlords terrorizing the rural countryside. But *Mill* brought the moral conflict very close to home.

Not only was *Mill* set in the urban metropolis of Bombay but its primary audiences were located in the broader Bombay Presidency area. Statistics from this period show that Bombay's film audiences had a 33 to 47 percent share in nationwide theatrical revenues.<sup>15</sup> This large audience share was mainly due to the state of distribution and exhibition infrastructures in the 1930s, with film theaters concentrated in a few urban centers and a distribution network focused on building up a few territories and unable to expand much farther due to a lack of reliable capital. Film viewership in Bombay depended heavily on working-class audiences solicited in theaters built in cotton-mill neighborhoods. *Mill's* censors were therefore not simply speculating about an imagined working-class audience, but they were envisioning the actually existing proletarian film publics of Bombay. In fact, when the film was finally released in 1939, reviewers noted that it "has a natural and immediate appeal to local film audiences which should go far towards the expectations of its producer."<sup>16</sup> *Mill*, proud of its realism, had veered too close to a proximate spatiotemporal reality for the censors to endorse.

In the meantime, the Punjab Board of Film Certification in northern India cleared *Mill* with only one cut of 121 feet, and it was released in Lahore in November 1934, providing us with the date that continues to be recorded as the theatrical release date of the film and marker of its provenance.<sup>17</sup> The alert reader will have noted that by November 1934, the film had seen two separate edits to placate the Bombay censors. Lahore should have received a third iteration of *Mill*, a brand-new film already thrice-retold. In January 1935, the BBFC examined *Mill* again, a film now shorter by at least 1,500 feet, and again refused to certify it on the grounds that "it is a travesty of mill life and management, the effects of which are likely to be harmful to the relations between employers and workers in India."<sup>18</sup> Unwilling to concede defeat at the hands of the censors, the filmmakers unilaterally made "further cuts in the picture making it altogether inoffensive and they even changed the name of the picture from *Mill* or *Mazdoor* to *Seth ki Ladki* [Boss's Daughter]" in a move that had become common in India at the time—to substitute provocative word choices in titles and dialogues with words more palatable to the censors.<sup>19</sup> This film, ostensibly a different film, was again denied certification, with the secretary of the BBFC, S. G. Panandikar, declaring that "my Board has decided to refuse a certificate for it, as ... there is running throughout the film the idea of the conflict of capital and labor. Much of it depicts the squandering by the members of the capitalist class of money earned by labor in contrast with the squalid conditions under which labor lives. The film is, in the opinion of the Board, a *direct incitement to discontent* in labor circles" (emphasis added).<sup>20</sup> Curiously, even as the filmmakers tried to render the film less offensive with each edit, the censors grew more incensed, finally

admitting that their fear was that the film would serve as a direct incitement of proletarian passions.

Censorship serves as a key indicator of institutional attitudes toward popular politics and mass culture, especially in the first decades of cinema in colonial India. Thus, early film critics like Aruna Vasudev (1978) zoomed in on the repressive function of censorship as a disciplinary state apparatus. More recently, film scholars and historians such as Poonam Arora (1995), Priya Jaikumar (2006), and Monika Mehta (2011) have discussed the multiple foci of the censorial colonial gaze.<sup>21</sup> For the British, Indian cinema was an unruly and potentially dangerous site for anticolonial propaganda, and films could be banned for using provocative words such as *independence* and *home rule* or even if they featured fictional characters that bore a resemblance to Mahatma Gandhi.<sup>22</sup> There were also anxieties about “moral decency,” with the British administration especially nervous about the depiction of the white woman in Hollywood imports, the argument being that representations of white women as sexually available would catalyze sexual assaults on British women in the colony because susceptible Indians would conflate fiction with reality.<sup>23</sup> In his book *Censorium*, William Mazzarella argues that the popularity of crowd theory in European social science neatly tied into racial theories of native inferiority to justify the need for film censorship in the colony.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the colonial state sought to control supposedly objectionable films ostensibly in order to safeguard the moral hygiene of its impressionable and volatile subjects.

British colonial censors did their preemptive work with such zeal that they developed quite a reputation by the 1930s. In 1938, an article in the *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers* noted that “in India, one is forbidden to show, in motion pictures, ‘organized knuckle fights’ or ‘profuse bleeding,’” a restriction that the author finds patently ridiculous. He goes on to declare that “one is inclined to agree with a report from British Malaya, expressing the opinion that apparently ‘the local censor does not take into consideration the growing sophistication of native audiences.’”<sup>25</sup> The author identifies, from a comparative perspective, the colonial censor’s racial assumptions of native inferiority and immaturity, even if his view subtly affirms a developmental lag between native and other audiences. A history of censorship tells us something very specific about colonial attitudes toward the colonized and exposes the racism that underlies the infantilization of native moviegoing publics.

At the same time, there emerged a robust anticolonial cultural movement in India against foreign films that displayed a patently racist or imperialist agenda in their depictions of exotic India and caricatured Indians.<sup>26</sup> As Prem Chowdhry outlines, in 1938 a massive protest against the Korda brothers’ *The Drum* (1938) “brought the uptown commercial and business areas of Bombay



# "The Drum" Provokes a Nation

"Filmindia" Launches the First Protest  
Film to be Picketed All Over India

83 Persons Arrested in Bombay

Nation Condemns The Picture

Madras Government Bans "The Drum"

On the 29th of August, "filmindia" came out with its smashing editorial about "The Drum" pointing out in no unmistakable terms the anti-Indian element in the picture. This was the first word on the subject as no one knew anything about "The Drum" till then.

On the 30th, the editor forwarded copies of "filmindia" to the different provincial Prime Ministers and leading journalists of the city.

On the 1st September "The Drum" was released at two cinemas simultaneously in the city—The "Excelsior" and the "New Empire".

On the 3rd September Mr. S. A. Brelvi, the Editor of "The Bombay Chronicle" came out with a personal article on "The Drum" con-

demning, the imperialist propaganda contained in the picture with the following words:

"The object of the film is obvious. It is to glorify British imperialism and create an impression in the minds of those who see it that the frontier tribesmen are a horde of wily, treacherous and ferocious men and that Britain is performing an unselfish and beneficent task in dealing with them in the manner in which she has been doing".

#### Baburao Patel's Telegram to Premier

In the afternoon, Mr. Baburao Patel sent the following telegram to the Hon. Mr. B. G. Kher, Prime Minister, the Government of Bombay:

"Reference our letter thirtieth re: editorial "filmindia" September issue published on the 1st regarding the film "The Drum" now running in Bombay, our views strongly supported by the eminent journalist Mr. S. A. Brelvi, the editor of "The Bombay Chronicle" in to-day's issue. Request immediate action. At least provincial Congress Governments must uphold national prestige by banning such anti-Indian films and setting example to foreign producers for future".

By evening several dailies had come out with the protest smashing "The Drum" to bits. Mass meetings were organised at several places in the city and the leaders addressed several meetings explaining to the people the insinuation and the insult in the picture.

On the 4th September a country wide protest was broadcast and all the national papers supported the original view taken by "filmindia".

From the 5th to the 9th numerous protest meetings in the different parts of the city were held and one and all condemned "The Drum". Mr. Asis Laljee, leader of the Muslim Nawajawans sent the following telegram to the Hon. Mr. K. M. Munshi, the Home Minister.

"Respect public sentiment. Request stop immediately screening Drum film".

In the afternoon on the 8th a deputation consisting of prominent leaders like Asis Laljee, Mahomed Amin Azad, Yousuff Moledina, Mahomed Ahsan and Ibrahim



Mr. Sohrab Mody is the elder brother of Mr. Keki Mody. Sohrab is enthusiastic about film production. He conducts the Minerva Movietone and his picture "Vasantee" will soon come to the screen at Minerva.



Mr. Keki M. Mody, the enterprising Mg. Director Western India Theatres, controlling "New Empire" and "Excelsior" Theatres in Bombay. Mr. Mody showed exemplary courage in running "The Drum" in the face of the severe public protest.

**Fig 2:** *filmindia* magazine's editor, Baburao Patel, led a nationwide agitation against *The Drum* (1938) on the grounds that it was blatantly racist. (*filmindia*, October 1938, 25)

city to a virtual halt. ... Described as 'riots' in the colonial records, it took the police more than a week to bring the situation under control."<sup>27</sup> *The Drum* had to be withdrawn from theaters. The film's Islamophobic propaganda brought hundreds of working-class Muslim youths out into the streets, alongside the

lettered classes of film critics and screenwriters who wrote petitions against its “anti-India” rhetoric (fig. 2).<sup>28</sup> What becomes patently clear here is that at the time that *Mill*’s theatrical future was being debated by the censor boards in Bombay, cinema had emerged as a conspicuous site for, and subject of, political debate, negotiation, and contestation in colonial India.

Whether we examine the censor’s control of films considered unsuitable in the colony or the nationalist Indian’s outrage against racist representation, we are confronted by a widespread belief in the power of cinema to sway hearts and minds. This power was conceived to lie in cinema’s sensory address, the visceral potential of *mise-en-scène* and spectacle to move audiences into action and agitation. Mazzarella observes that “the colonial censors’ objection to ‘political’ films often had a great deal to do with the sensory erotics of their spectacular appeal.”<sup>29</sup> *Mill*, with its emphasis on industrial unrest and labor struggle, carried a different order of sensory erotic charge. A socialist critique of the re-released and severely edited 1939 version noted that despite the modifications made by the director and the censors, “whatever dramatic vigor [*Mill*] has is in the strike scenes. ... A shot in which a worker is shown clenching his fist in indignation, by itself, has intense drama in it.”<sup>30</sup> For the BBFC, the dramatic intensity of a filmic fist clenched in anger threatened to translate into a thousand fists raised against the city’s capitalist infrastructure. At core was trepidation about the mimetic power of cinema to induce action, that is, to instigate a collective uprising of working-class spectators who might seem newly awakened from a Benjaminian perspective, or could be viewed as lumpenized sleepwalkers from a law-and-order perspective.<sup>31</sup>

### SITE-SPECIFIC ANXIETIES

The protracted censorship battle around *Mill* references the nervousness felt by Indian business elites and the colonial government in the face of the growing global influence of communism and the increasing local clout of trade unions. By the 1920s, several socialist and communist factions had emerged in Bombay to promote trade unionism and mobilize this energy toward different utopian visions for India’s political future. The Communist Party of India was founded in 1925, with its headquarters in Bombay. In 1928, Bombay was the site of a large-scale general strike that involved “over 150,000 workers in more than 80 mills over a period of about 18 months ... [and] developed and manifested widespread support among workers for the communists.”<sup>32</sup> Bombay’s mill workers resoundingly demonstrated their ability for powerful solidarity actions, leading to the development of a strong labor movement in interwar Bombay. In 1929, the colonial government initiated a major legal purge of communist leaders in the so-called Meerut Conspiracy Case, a trial that went on till 1933.

It was the “most expensive legal case in British imperial history and tried 32 activists, revolutionaries, and trade unionists who had allegedly entered into a conspiracy to deprive the king-emperor of his sovereignty of British India.”<sup>33</sup> According to labor historian Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, the general strikes of 1928–29 and 1933–34 highlighted the transformation of the mill workers’ struggle from localized and individual mill protests to massive coordination efforts that encompassed mills across the city, often garnering support from farther afield. What had changed was the militant and coordinated nature of working-class action in interwar India.

The government became so jumpy about the intensifying industrial struggle that even an acclaimed foreign film like *Metropolis* (1927) was banned when it arrived in Bombay in 1932 because it “deal[t] with conflict between labor and capital and class-hatred and depict[ed] many mob scenes.”<sup>34</sup> *Metropolis* had already suffered many blows for its communist themes. In America, the playwright Sydney Pollock was commissioned by Paramount to edit the film, purportedly to reduce its length. Back in Berlin in 1927, *Metropolis* was temporarily withdrawn and Ufa’s board of directors eventually decided that “*Metropolis*, in its American version, after the removal of titles that tend to be communist in nature,” could be screened again in Germany.<sup>35</sup> That the BBFC banned *Metropolis* four years after its release, in 1932, points to the geopolitics of Euro-American film distribution time lines in territories such as India, while also connecting Bombay with other industrial urban film centers within a global capitalist economy. To illustrate, of the 1,618 films examined in England by the British Board of Film Censors in 1926, four were outright rejected with one film being banned for “Bolshevist propaganda.”<sup>36</sup> A paranoid discourse about “red films” was underway in the United States, at least a decade before the House Committee on Un-American Activities’ examination of Hollywood (1947). Local police censors in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Ohio rejected films such *The Youth of Maxim* (1935) for being communistic. One of the world’s largest Catholic organizations, the Knights of Columbus, started a campaign against communistic motion pictures with the argument that “motion pictures which infect the minds of Americans, particularly of American children, with Communist propaganda forfeit the right to exhibition.”<sup>37</sup>

In 1934, the very year that Ajanta Cinetone applied for the certification of *Mill*, the colonial government declared the Communist Party of India (CPI) illegal.<sup>38</sup> Not only was the Crown afraid of the anti-imperial stance of the CPI and the growing specter of communist agitation across the globe, but Bombay’s indigenous millowners themselves were opposed to what they perceived as propagandistic films inimical to mercantile interests. In 1935, Devidas Madhowji Thakersey, member and former president of the Indian Merchants Chamber,

wrote a detailed letter of complaint to the Governor of Bombay about films with anticapitalist content or communist ideology:

I beg to invite your Excellency's attention to the fact that the Cinema films have also come in handy for the propagation of views in favor of Communism. In a picture recently exhibited in Bombay by name *Bharat-ki-Beti*, a clerk in a mercantile firm is shown as being asked to abet in a criminal misappropriation by his master and on his refusal to do so is dismissed. His child dies of starvation and the distracted father carries the dead body of the child to the capitalist's house. Just at that time the capitalist is entertaining his friends at a grand evening party in the lawn of his house and the man with the body of his dead child rushes into the lawn and harangues the people there. The substance of his speech is in essence only the Communist philosophy.<sup>39</sup>

Thakersey's complaint was dismissed by the board but versions of his anxieties crop up repeatedly in the censorship files. Not every film escaped the censor's wrath. An unprecedented number of Indian and foreign films were proscribed or refused certification by the BBFC in 1935–36 for their supposed communistic themes. *We Live Again* (1934), a Hollywood adaptation of Leo Tolstoy's 1899 novel *Resurrection*, was banned "on the ground that its communistic theme was not suitable for exhibition in India."<sup>40</sup> The film was a melodramatic morality tale about Russia's feudal aristocracy and a young peasant girl seduced and abandoned by a prince. After many torturous travails, the heroine is reunited with her repentant lover who redistributes his lands among his peasant subjects. *Black Fury* (1935), already controversial in America for its fictionalization of a real strike during which a coal miner was murdered by management, was also banned in Bombay Presidency "on the ground that it sought to justify during industrial strikes direct action by the workers even to the extent of using explosives to destroy their employers' property."<sup>41</sup>

These cases reveal an idiosyncratic portfolio of banned films that were only connected by their dramatization of class conflict. Here, it is important to note the composition of the BBFC. Since 1922 the post of secretary was occupied by professors of Elphinstone College in Bombay, while the board included the current commissioner of police and the collector of customs.<sup>42</sup> It also included three "non-official members"—all former sheriffs of Bombay, prominent citizens, and philanthropists (N. V. Mandlik, S. K. Barodawalla, Sir Byramjee Jeejeebhoy).<sup>43</sup> S. G. Panandikar, the secretary of the BBFC who oversaw the *Mill* case, was a professor of history and economics at Elphinstone College with a degree from the London School of Economics and had written books such

as *Industrial Labor in India* (1933) and *Banking in India* (1934). A review of his 1933 book suggests that while he sympathized with workers' demands, he also believed that labor legislation "is apt to reduce the spontaneity and adaptability of the private efforts of employers for the improvement of the lot of workers," and trade unionism creates a "danger of serious conflict between the workers and their employers."<sup>44</sup> With such decisive views against unionism, Panandikar was aligned with the civil servants and wealthy citizens on the board who all had overt stakes in the discipline and management of the working class. Business histories of late colonial Bombay often point to this seeming paradox—the collaboration and alignment of British and Indian interests in the sphere of mercantile and industrial capitalism in a time of intense anticolonial fervor. As a microcosm of the class-based alliances that structured the city, the BBFC brought together a range of intellectual, administrative, and financial interests that were unified in their support of capitalist enterprise at the cost of labor mobilization and constituted what may be termed the industrial-colonial complex.

Organized struggle is the centerpiece of *Mill*. This is apparent in all accounts of the film, including official publicity materials and the synopses analyzed by the BBFC. Lists of suggested cuts and deleted shots reveal that the 1934 film laid out a template for successful strike mobilization. Strike readiness, maximum participation, negotiation tactics, strategies to face management pressure and propaganda, and resistance toward strikebreakers were all depicted in minute detail. *Mill* also delineated classic strategies used by management to demobilize collective action. As such, the film offered a sensational manual for organizing strikes in a city that had already earned a reputation for its successful proletarian solidarity actions. Strikes were a daily reality in Bombay, and many of the proscribed scenes belonged to a familiar repertoire of everyday occurrences on the streets of Bombay, splashed across daily headlines in local newspapers. Objectionable details in *Mill* such as the hiring of so-called blacklegs to break a strike and other divisive tactics of mill management were tried and tested union-busting methods frequently covered by local journalists and heavily condemned by labor leaders. *Mill*'s realistic representation of these practices was thought to serve as kindling for heightened industrial-affective conflagration.

The censorship saga around *Mill* therefore references a site-specific nervousness that highlights the material imbrication of finance, politics, industry, and culture within Bombay's cine-ecology. The *Mill* case study is important for film theory and history because it demonstrates the fundamental inextricability of culture and economy, politics and affect, fictional representation and historical context. Films constitute the "power-geometries" of a place: power

differentials that mark the mobility of the film artifact and its ability to exit the censor's office and enter a theatrical space of public exhibition.<sup>45</sup> The power of the colonial state and indigenous business elite, the power of a resurgent proletarian struggle, the power of an independent production company, and the power of an aesthetic representation of social inequality are varied, and these asymmetries marked 1930s Bombay.

Bombay city and its issues bled into its cinema representationally, but the everyday lives of cinema's publics also merged into the film industry's material life in the city. Cotton mill districts, residential neighborhoods inhabited by mill workers, and the earliest theaters to screen exclusively Indian films were spatially connected. Rajnarayan Chandavarkar tells us that "from the late nineteenth century onwards ... the city's poor began to drift away from the high rents of the native town to the villages of Parel, to Mazgaon and Tarwadi, Sewri and Kamathipura."<sup>46</sup> The city's cotton mills were increasingly concentrated in these same areas, and "90 percent of the city's mill workers lived within fifteen minutes' walking distance of their place of work."<sup>47</sup> The high concentration of working-class populations led to the increased demand for cinema theaters in these neighborhoods. As silent-film studios started appearing in proximity to these neighborhoods, the lives of millhands extended into the physical world of film production through the informal economies surrounding film production. An exceptional and tragic event from 1936 puts our discussion of site specificity into sharp and unbearable relief: "Worried by financial difficulties, Krishna Sakharam Gavde (35), a middle-age millhand threw himself into a well in the compound of the Jayant Film Company at Naigaum [Dadar East], Bombay, on Wednesday. At the Coroner's inquest, on Thursday, Sakharam Narayen, Krishna's father, and a police constable gave evidence. The father identified the body as that of his son. The police constable stated that he found a letter on the person of Krishna which stated that he had thrown himself into the well as he was in monetary difficulties. Verdict: Suicide."<sup>48</sup> Looming large over Gavde's suicide note is the specter of a city speeding toward capitalist ideals of industrial productivity at the cost of thousands of laboring bodies. The nexus of local businessmen and colonial administrators that constituted the BBFC in 1934 microcosmically represents the forces responsible for labor distress. For the colonial government, Bombay was an industrial engine for imperial growth, status, and profit-making. For indigenous capitalists and entrepreneurs, Bombay offered a rare site for Indian financial and industrial investment. It is no accident, then, that Jayant Film Company was located in Naigaum, home of one of the largest tenement housing blocks built in India. These workers' chawls (tenement housing typical for Bombay) were hurriedly designed to warehouse bodies rather than house them.<sup>49</sup> Several of Bombay's silent and early talkie studios and cinema theaters

were located in this neighborhood, Dadar, from where the cine-ecology sourced its material resources, workforce, and primary audiences. In all likelihood, thirty-five-year old Gavde's life in Bombay was circumscribed by the parameters of this neighborhood as he walked from tenement to factory to cinema and back again each day.

## CINEMATIC COMMUNISM

Censorship in late colonial India is mostly discussed in terms of gender, nationalism, morality, and religion. The story of communism as the target during a critical period in the life of Bombay offers us a new lens to examine the relation between cinema, modernity, and politics in the 1930s. *Mill* and other proscribed films of the communistic variety inaugurated a new popular trope and narrative conflict for Bombay cinema—labor versus capital. This trope comes into view when we think locationally with the sites of film production and historicize the logics of colonial censorship as they kept up with exigencies in global ideological wars. In the censors' view, *Mill* offered a direct incitement to disgruntled mill workers of the city who had been involved in a long historical industrial struggle against capitalist millowners. While this was a fear embedded in the local urban context, a growing prohibitory mood also developed in the film ecologies of England and the United States against so-called communistic motion pictures. A spatialization of the anticommunist imperative in mainstream film thus positions Bombay as an important node in a transnational itinerary of the specter of communism as it intersects with the conditions of colonialism, a global capitalist economy, and proscriptive approaches to cinema. A simultaneously localized, historicized, and spatialized approach to film censorship can therefore lead us to alternate archives that can prove to be very generative for film history and historiography.

If local capitalists were afraid that *Mill* provided a cheap and visceral textbook for proletarian revolution, the film's producers were banking on its topicality. Publicity materials underlined what the producers considered the main attractions of the films, each addressed to the viewer's *visual* senses; for instance, "We see the Seth Hansraj Textile Mill—how it looms like destiny itself above the little creatures that serve it and feed it," and "Next. What a glimpse of the working of the Mill!"<sup>50</sup> Indeed, *Mill* was tapping an attraction that was central to the promise of Bombay cinema: the heady visualization of Indian modernity. The 1938 film *Industrial India* exemplified this promise. This lost film was directed by Mohan Sinha who was known for writing and directing films that were self-consciously modern in their spectacularization of industry, technology, fashion, and urbanism. In an advertising blitz for *Industrial India*, the filmmakers underscored their use of real factory locations in Bombay

to depict the wonders of modern technology and indigenous industry. From Godrej steel to E. S. Patanwala's perfumes to the Golden Tobacco Company, *Industrial India* assured filmic access to the city's best-known *swadeshi* manufacturers.<sup>51</sup> On display here was the very fact of homegrown enterprise and the alliance of India with industry (hence, the title of the film). *Mill*, too, promised its audiences industrial spectacles shot on location. Moreover, *Mill* positioned industrial unrest as a marker of Bombay's modernity and a cinematic spectacle in its own right.

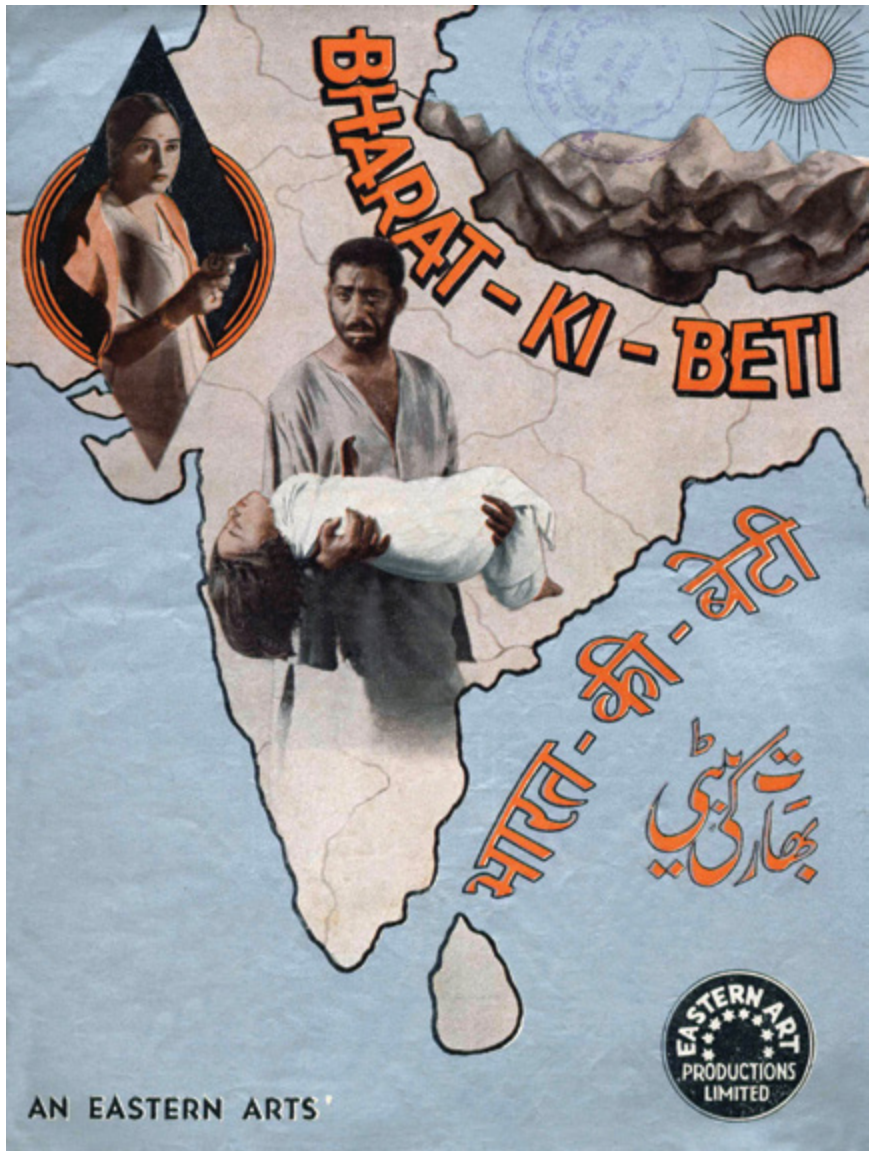
The Marathi-language synopsis for *Mill* dramatically opens with the word "Gi-r-ni!," spelling out the Marathi word for a mechanized mill and a word around which thousands of factory workers had mobilized in the previous decade. The "girni kamgaar" or mill worker had emerged as a resonant symbol of Bombay city and its preeminent industrial status in South Asia. At the same time, the girni kamgaar also emerged as a new urban social figure, a hardworking blue-collar worker conscious of the dignity of labor.<sup>52</sup> Not only were the living and occupational conditions of the working class a matter for daily debate in newspapers and administrative councils, but the worker was centrally mobilized as the herald of solidarity struggles by communists, nationalists, and trade unionists. The new modernist and progressive literature of these years also seized upon the *mazdoor* (worker) as the flag bearer of change. Premchand (1880–1936), the celebrity writer of *Mill*, had established a reputation for social-realist writing and espousing the causes of the poor and down-trodden. According to some scholars, by the time he wrote *Mill*, Premchand's social realist writing had taken a more aggressive turn toward a certain soft communism. This is the explanation provided for why Premchand was elected the first president of the Progressive Writers Association (PWA) in 1936, an organization founded with a manifesto of antifascist, anticapitalist ideals. In his historic address to the gathering, Premchand laid out a new vision of what is deemed beautiful and worth describing in literature, connecting this aesthetic vision with a new political vision for a free India: "It [beauty] will not stay confined to one class. Its flight will not be limited by the four walls of the garden but will have the entire universe at its disposal. Then we shall not tolerate base taste; we will gird our loins and dig its grave. Then we will not be ready to tolerate that state of affairs in which thousands of people are slaves to a few; then and only then will we bring into being a constitution which will not be in contradiction to beauty, good taste, self-respect, and humaneness."<sup>53</sup>

Premchand makes the case for turning the literary gaze away from the elite subjects and worlds of past tradition and toward the marginalized and oppressed protagonists of society who were hitherto not deemed worthy of artistic representation. *Mill*'s focus on factory workers and its elaborate detailing of



strike mobilizations and privations may be viewed as embodying this alternate view of beauty and truth in art. At the same time, the film also foregrounded the pleasures of a profligate wealthy lifestyle to drive home the gap between rich and poor, evil and good. For certainly, it would not be a commercial film if it did not participate in the visual economy of sexualized spectacle and mild eroticism that was common in the 1930s. Bombay cinema of the 1930s cannot be called social realist in the vein of modernist literature of the same era, but it too was inventing new protagonists to represent the modern age. The emergence of the social film as a genre of the contemporary marked a shift away from the mythological and devotional films of the silent era. Instead of gods and saints, the new social films frequently featured middle-class protagonists struggling with questions of companionate marriage, debt and unemployment, caste hierarchies, college education, and other social-reform issues. In terms of images of Bombay's mill workers, *Mill* was not the first film to tackle the topic. The silent film *Bismi Sadi* (1924) centers on a cotton mill owner and apparently "the mise en scene of a factory workers' violent revolt figured prominently in the film's marketing campaign."<sup>54</sup> *Bharat ki Beti* (India's Daughter, 1935), *Shaher ka Jadoo* or *Lure of the City* (1934), and *Ghar Jamai* (Househusband, 1935) all dealt with the crisis of urban unemployment, economic inequality, and the arrogance of wealth (fig. 3). However, *Mill* captured a new tenor in Bombay's industrial life—the turn to greater unionization and militancy.

The Marathi-language synopsis uses words such as *girni kamgar* (mill worker), *atyachaar* (oppression, cruelty), and *maalak* (capitalist boss) which had wide currency in the city via a working-class public sphere that emerged in the 1920s with strikes, associational culture, and neighborhood mobilizations.<sup>55</sup> Communist visions, ideology, and interpretations flowed through Bombay cinema, and films played an important role in the dispersal of socialist ideals. Much of this was direct, insofar as certain key players in the film production process subscribed to Marxist ideology. For example, the silent-film producer and scenarist Indulal Yajnik (1892–1972) was put on a watchlist of "Prominent Communists in the Bombay Presidency" in 1928 alongside comrades Dange and Jhabwala.<sup>56</sup> Yajnik worked as a journalist and editor in the 1910s and 1920s, and it was when he was editor of the progressive newspaper *Hindustan* (1924–1928) that he came under the British local government's anticommunist surveillance gaze. Yajnik's "love for the *khedut* or farmer, and *mazdoor* or worker" is of a piece with the discursive and affective resonance around these historical subjects in the interwar period.<sup>57</sup> In the late 1930s, a new group of politically committed and ideologically left-leaning writers, actors, and lyricists entered the Bombay cine-ecology. The Progressive Writers Movement (PWM) created a vibrant space for Marxist modernists, anti-imperialist intellectuals, and socially committed



**Fig. 3:** Song booklet cover for *Bharat-ki-Beti* (India's Daughter, 1935), directed by Premankur Aorthy and produced by Eastern Arts. (Courtesy of National Film Archives of India)

nationalists who chose literature, theater, and film as their primary mode of expression. A spate of working-class films was produced in the 1940s by writers and affiliates of the PWM as well as members of the Indian Peoples' Theatre Association, which was closely affiliated with the Communist Party of India.



**Fig. 4:** Song booklet cover for *Mud* or *Apni Nagariya*, written by Sa'adat Hasan Manto, directed by Gunjal, and produced by Hindustan Cinetone (1940). (Courtesy of National Film Archives of India)

*Mill* also set the stage for a new romantic formula that was to endure in Bombay cinema until the 1980s—the romantic challenges of the wealthy heiress and the idealistic worker-hero. Padma, emblematic of the benevolent possibilities of capitalism, leads a peaceful strike against her brother, Vinod, the evil emblem of extraction. Her lover, Kailash, joins her in this struggle and they

insist on nonviolence as the way forward. In 1940, the prominent Urdu writer Sa'adat Hasan Manto wrote a film for Hindustan Movietone titled *Mud* (*Keechad* or *Apni Nagariya*) which appears to be strongly modeled on *Mill* (fig. 4). The plot revolves around the hostility between a tyrannical factory owner and his disgruntled workers. Upon the owner's death, his fashionable daughter Sushila takes charge of the factory and slowly comes to empathize with the lot of the underpaid, exploited mazdoors. Once again, the emblematic onus of societal change rests with the heroine, as she must negotiate with the workers and signal a new democratic model of management. Sushila, like Padma, uses her intelligence and empathy to make an alliance between capital and labor. Certainly, this romantic trope of the benevolent heiress was a dramatic tactic to present a glamorous heroine at the center of a film about workers' rights. However, we would be remiss not to assert that this trope had a remarkable historical precedent in Anasuya Sarabhai, who is considered the first female trade-union activist in India. Sarabhai came from a wealthy family in Ahmedabad, and after an early divorce, she went to England for higher education. Here she learned about the ideas of the suffragettes and Fabian socialists and became a lifelong champion of social equality. Back in Bombay Presidency, Sarabhai focused her attentions on women and mill workers and eventually disputed with her own brother, Ambalal Sarabhai, who was the president of the Ahmedabad Mill Owners' Association during the mill workers' strike of 1918.<sup>58</sup> Gandhi's involvement brought this strike to national attention, and in a letter to the editor of the *Times of India* Gandhi himself laid out the contours of the strike situation, the poor wages of the mill workers, and the "hardened hearts" of the mill owners. Of Anasuya Sarabhai and her brother he said, "The millhands were represented by [Ambalal Sarabhai's] sister Anasuyaben. She possesses a heart of gold. She is full of pity for the poor. The millhands adore her. Her word is law with them. I have not known a struggle fought with so little bitterness and such courtesy on either side. This happy result is principally due to the connections with it of Mr. Ambalal Sarabhai and Anasuyaben."<sup>59</sup> The fictive Padma and Sushila derived their moral force from the real-life Anasuya. Padma's persuasive powers in *Mill* and Sushila's ideological transformation in *Mud* become completely plausible when viewed through the historical Anasuya's political trajectory. In *Mill*, when blacklegs are hired by the management to incite violence and disrupt worker solidarity, Padma's gentle persuasion prevails. According to the 1939 song booklet, "even the blacklegs refuse [monetary inducement] and the strike continues peacefully and with exemplary unity among the strikers." *Mud* in 1940 even retains the catalyzing context of the plague that affected Ahmedabad and contributed to the workers' disaffection in 1918. Manto, allied with the PWM, might have been directly borrowing from Premchand's script with full knowledge of the Sarabhai incident.

The narrative formula of a wealthy heiress-turned-strike sympathizer was here to stay and became commercially more potent when coupled with a love plot involving cross-class romance. In New Theatres' Bengali hit, *Udayer Pathe/Hamrahi* (1944), we see the privileged daughter of an industrialist gradually come to respect the ideology of a leftist writer of social-realist novels, Anoop, who draws sketches of Marx and Shaw on his bedroom wall and organizes workers in his spare time.<sup>60</sup> The film is striking in the explicitly antibourgeois rhetoric spouted by the hero and the film's insistence on class solidarity. But for die-hard socialist and actor Balraj Sahni, the film's romantic solution was escapist even if it did "ridicule devastatingly the capitalist system. ... The last 'fade-out' showed the hero and the heroine walk hand-in-hand towards the horizon—a very typical end to a New Theatres' film—which seemed to indicate that they had left all their problems to 'kismet!'"<sup>61</sup> Around the same time, Nitin Bose made another *Mazdoor* (1945) which also featured the poor-man-meets-wealthy-heiress story, except this time they do not end up married. There is another heroine, a working-class woman, who steals the hero's heart. This time Balraj Sahni was better satisfied with the denouement: "*Mazdoor*, however, had refused to end on such an escapist note. Moreover, its hero did not marry the millionaire's daughter. Far from making out that the workers themselves were to be blamed for their plight, the film had the courage to say in unequivocal terms that it was through unity and solidarity alone that the workers could break the capitalist system and lead our people on to the path of socialism."<sup>62</sup> Despite these differences, sufficient numbers of overtly anticapitalist films were being made in the 1940s to merit the attention as well as the dismissal of film critics. By the time the 1946 film *Neecha Nagar* was released (and won the Grand Prix at the first Cannes Film Festival), the well-known film critic Clare Mendonca announced that "the story of *Neecha Nagar* is the corniest chestnut of the Indian screen: Rich vs Poor, Capital vs Labour, freedom vs Liberty, with so-called 'national struggle' for background and atmosphere: the tub-thumper's invariable formula for popularity and success, in short."<sup>63</sup> This formula was to find renewed life in 1970s postcolonial Bombay, with a final resurgence of mill workers' agitations and the rise of the Bollywood superstar Amitabh Bachchan, who frequently appeared in the role of a proletarian "angry young man."

## WHEN IS A FILM? THE TEMPORALITY OF CENSORSHIP

A specter is that which is without substance, divorced from the flesh. A lost film such as the multiply excised *Mill* is spectral in its multiple separations from its body and its repeated archival returns. Filmed, censored, edited, released, banned, released again, and finally lost, *Mill* appears, disappears, and reappears, each time with a minor alteration that makes its presence uncanny.

Display Ad 7 - No Title  
 The Times of India (1939 current): Jun 3, 1939, PostQuest Historical Newspapers: The Times of India  
 Pg. 13

**AT LAST COMES TODAY**

THE PICTURE OF the People **GALA OPENING**  
 The Picture FOR the PEOPLE! TODAY AT 1-45 P.M.

Mr. BHULABHAI DESAI,  
 LEADER of the Congress Party  
 in the Central LEGISLATURE,  
 PRESIDENT of the Bombay  
 Provincial CONGRESS Com-  
 mittee, will INAUGURATE



Story by:  
 Munshi  
 PREMCHAND  
 Orchestration by:  
 W. KAUFFMAN

India's FIRST  
 HUMAN Picture  
 of Human Beings.

The Film depicting the GRIM STRUGGLE  
 of MILLIONS for their DAILY BREAD!



The Film with the message of Hope for the Workers!  
 The Film appealing for better understanding  
 between the MASTERS and the WORKERS  
 For their own and HUMANITY'S GOOD.



- SEE The Hansraj Textile Mill in full working.
- SEE The RALLY of the Workers!
- SEE The Workers on STRIKE!
- SEE The Intelligent Brains of the Workers and FINALLY.
- SEE The DIVINE HAND of the WOMAN going to the RESCUE of the Oppressed!



Featuring  
 A RARE  
 Combination  
 of Brilliant  
 STARS  
**BIBBO**  
 (Lovelier than  
 Ever)  
**P. JAYRAJ**  
 (of 'Bhab')



**NAYAMPALLY  
 BHUDO  
 ADVANI  
 Tarabai**

All this with a background of DELICIOUS  
 Romance, SWEET Music, DAINTY  
 Dances!

The MOST POIGNANT HUMAN  
 DRAMA you have yet seen on the Screen.

Daily 3 Shows: **IMPERIAL** Sat, Sun. & Holidays  
 4-30, 7-15 and MATINEES  
 10 P. M. Cinema - Lamington Rd. At 1-45 P. M.

Reprinted with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Fig. 5: Advertisement from June 3, 1939, the day that *Mill* was finally released in Bombay city. (*Times of India*, 13)

Jacques Derrida reminds us that the specter is also a “paradoxical incorporation, a becoming-body,” and lost films like *Mill* stage recursive archival returns, appearing in varied forms whether in archives of paper or in scrap metal junkyards, continually awaiting embodiment, a partial resubstantiation.<sup>64</sup>

In June 1939 *Mill* made its final known return to the silver screen. Through the month of May, Bombay’s newspapers carried splashy advertisements announcing the film’s imminent release “any day now!” Finally, the “all-India” premiere of *Mill* took place on June 3, 1939, at 1:45 p.m. in Bombay’s Imperial Theatre (fig. 5). Many reasons may explain why BBFC relented on the eve of the Second World War. In 1937, the nationalist Congress Party won a sweeping victory in Bombay’s provincial elections.<sup>65</sup> This resulted in a reconfiguration of the BBFC, and for the first time, representatives of the local film industry were included on the board—prominent film producers such as Bombay Talkies’ Rai Sahib Chuni Lal and Chimanlal Desai from Sagar Movietone.<sup>66</sup> It is possible that these industry insiders advocated for censor leniency.

Meanwhile, labor unrest in the city had worsened. On April 11, 1939, three thousand workers at Phoenix Mills went on a stay-in strike to protest against altered wages, work conditions, and an announcement of an indefinite mill closure. Armed police had to be called in before the strike was halted. The millowners hired temporary workers who were accompanied to the gates of Phoenix Mills by armed police and tear-gas squads.<sup>67</sup> After tense picketing by more than two hundred female mill workers and hundreds of male comrades, the blacklegs, or as the *Times of India* newspaper preferred to term them, “the loyalists,” decided to withdraw.<sup>68</sup> *Mill* had been buried by the censors for its direct engagement with sensitive political issues urgent to Bombay city; now its producers capitalized on the labor unrest in the city to attract audiences. On May 20, 1939, Ajanta Cinetone announced: “To-day’s big news! Bombay Millhands to go on strike! The only way to avert the impending strike is for the millowners and millworkers to see [our film, *Mill*] jointly and simultaneously.”<sup>69</sup>

By all accounts, the final Bombay version of *Mill* on view in 1939 conformed to the Congress party line on labor by preaching a nonviolent end to labor demands and urging a compromise with millowners. A film critic in the Hindi-language paper *Vividh Vritta* suggested that the provincial government had compelled Bhavnani to make it a Gandhian propaganda film in exchange for lifting the ban.<sup>70</sup> New scenes added by Bhavnani just days before the 1939 premiere bear this suggestion out, most strikingly in this speech by the hero Kailash to the agitating workers (fig. 6):

KAILASH. We must always remain peaceful and nonviolent whatever may be the provocation. We can succeed only if we adopt

<u>P A R T</u>		
Shots.		<u>New shots added.</u>
Padma addressing workers to resort to peaceful strike.	Same.	
Workers leave shouting "We will make Hartal" fade out.	Same.	
Title: Ten days of the strike have passed and triumph of peaceful persuasion--The Mill workers succeed in preventing the other workers from taking their jobs.	Cancelled.	
Scene of Padma feeding labourers.	Same.	
Lorry loads of new labourers arrive.	cut.	
Manager comes and asks them to dismount.	Cut.	
Old labourers with Padma block gate and appeal to them to go back.	cut.	
Manager tells them to enter the Mill.	Cut	
Old labourers appeal again.	Cut.	
New Old labourers refuse and go.	Cut.	
Old and new labourers-embrace.	Cut	
Boss comes out and offers new labourers increased wages- Voice from outside new labourers refusing.	Cut	
		<i>Part 8</i>
		Insert New title- " Ten days of the strike have passed and the strikers in spite of suffering have behaved with great restraint and dignity but the resources of Padma are gradually dwindling.
<i>Part 8</i>		
Dialogues between brother and sister. Brother saying " You are ruining them, what will they eat ".etc. At that she takes out her ornaments and gives to the labourers.	Same.	

Fig. 6: An excerpt from the censor files indicating the cuts and changes required by the new Congress-led government of Bombay. (Courtesy of Maharashtra State Archives)

nonviolence as our sheet anchor. The millhands in Ahmedabad have been able to—achieve so much by peaceful and nonviolent means under the able guidance of our Revered Leader Mahatma Gandhi. We have our own Government who will listen to our grievances and give us justice but if we are violent the Government



have got sufficient strength to crush us, so you must not spoil the laborers cause.

CROWD. What you say is quite true. Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai [Long live Mahatma Gandhi]. Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai. Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai.<sup>71</sup>

Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, writing in the *Bombay Chronicle*, sarcastically wondered why the film had been banned in the first place, as “it appeared to be excellent propaganda for benevolent capitalism—and which capitalist ever confessed that he was not benevolent? I think the Millowners’ Association may profitably sponsor free shows of this film for their employees.” Abbas mainly objected to the weak critique of capitalism as the film chose to vilify a “few corrupt capitalist[s]” rather than “indict the system.”<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless, Bhavnani exploited the controversial censorship saga of the film, advertising it as “The Original Version of the Film That Was Banned,” and organizing a series of special screenings with political celebrities. On June 6, 1939, Bhavnani targeted progressive female audiences for a 4:30 p.m. show presided over by prominent women Gandhians and Congress Party workers, including Mrs. Hansa Mehta, Mrs. Jayashree Raijee, Lady Jagmohandas, and Mrs. Avantikabai Gokhale. The following week, another screening was attended by officials of the Girni Kamgar Union, many of whom had been tried in the infamous Meerut Conspiracy Case—“Labour-Leaders Comrades Dange, Bhise, Joglekar, Adhikari, Lalji, Pendse, Mirajkar, Mrs. Dange and Miss Beheray.”<sup>73</sup> Released on the eve of the Second World War, *Mill*’s second iteration bore witness to the temporary bonhomie between political interests that were to veer further apart as India’s role in the war was contested and debated through the early 1940s.

When does the life of a film begin? This article began as a response to the call for papers for the Fifteenth International Domitor Conference in 2018. The theme for 2018 was “provenance and early cinema,” connecting the material history of print circulation to its cultural meanings and aesthetic legacy. In my conference presentation I highlighted that the prevailing convention in film provenance, based on the year of theatrical release, can be misleading. It assumes that the life of a film begins once it sets out to interact with a world of paying viewers. Such a framework disregards staggered releases, second and third runs, re-releases, rediscovered prints, pirated versions, and censorship trails. An idea of provenance rooted in theatrical first release cannot accommodate the myriad material lives and afterlives of films. In this article I have demonstrated that a history of film censorship exposes the instability of our search for origins and originals. Films are edited, reedited, endlessly cut and amputated, sometimes even with different versions in circulation at the same

time. The case of *Mill* shows us that we need not polarize histories of diachronic and synchronic version.

Censorship also has its own peculiar affective temporality. Current discussions of the affective logics of censorship discount its temporal dimensions. Censorship is said to indicate the affective “intensity with which a permanent feature of public cultural communication was being registered,”<sup>74</sup> but it is worth pausing to consider that this affective intensity is not even allowed to register on the body of the public at-large. The censor’s fist comes down on a film long before it can have a sensory-visceral impact on the people; censorship is often an anticipatory act, a decision made by certain individuals to declare that a cinematic object might, in the future, cause public affective agitation. But coded into the censorship files is another moment of viewership—one that is predicated on the *nontheatrical* or, shall we say, *unintended*, audiences of a film—those privileged first spectators such as government officials, police personnel, and local bourgeoisie who served as censors and left a documentary trail of their own spectatorship. What is most intriguing in a film history told through censorship records is the larger-than-life presence of the figure of the censor, whose embodied viewing and subjective assessments determine the theatrical life of films.

By positing the censor as an affective subject, we are able to further complicate the time line of a film and its life of meaning-making in the world. In her work on film censorship and sexuality in India, Monika Mehta has suggested a similar reframing of subject positions in the realm of censorship. Mehta proposes an “analytical rupture between subject and practice, which are intimately bound together in the notion that the censors are the (only) ones who *cut* films.”<sup>75</sup> I am proposing a further analytical separation and a recombination of subject positions—to view the censor not only as the one who cuts but the one who views. The affective power of cinema and the affective intensities that are named and sought to be controlled by the censor are also felt in the body of the censor. This viewing position helps us mediate structural framings of censors as monolithically perverse power centers. In effect, cinema’s intended audiences bear the consequences of the affective viewing experience of the sensate censor. Be the affective charge felt or imagined, sensed or preempted, the censor’s viewing experience is undoubtedly significant to the story of film proscription.

Through this journey with *Mill*, I have sought to unsettle ideas of original films as well as original spectators. Which film must we lament today as being lost? Did the 1934 film ever survive the five-year delay in exhibition? Was the 1939 film an exact copy of the first unedited version? And how do we define the ontic status of the *Mill* that emerges from censor files, publicity materials, photographs, and film reviews? To illustrate, a version of *Mill* titled *Daya ki*



**Fig. 7:** Advertisement on the back cover of *filmindia* magazine, May 1936, for a film titled *Garib Parvar* (Patron of the Poor) or *Daya-ki-Devi* (Mistress of Mercy), featuring the exact same publicity stills as in *Mill* (1934/1939)

*Devi* or *Mistress of Mercy* circulated in publicity ephemera in 1936 (fig. 7), but it has no mention in the censor record. Similarly, positioning the censor as an embodied spectator further highlights the inseparability of politics and affect, here understood as affect's centrality in state machineries and in the very bodies of the state's representatives.

## Notes

1. Advertisement, *Bombay Chronicle*, June 2, 1939, 3. A lakh is a unit in the Indian numbering system denoting 100,000.
2. All statistics about the National Film Archive of India's holdings, as presented in this article, are based on the author's personal cross-checking of their catalogue in 2014. The NFAI is currently recataloging its materials, and these numbers are likely to change by the end of 2020. Statistics about the numbers of talkie films released between 1931 and 1949 are based on the *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema*, ed. Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 30.
3. "Questions of Locality," *Geography* 78, no. 2 (1993): 146–48.
4. However, as noted above, the NFAI is currently recataloging its materials, so these numbers may change.
5. For a closer look at the status of nitrate film in the NFAI and Indian film historians' inventive ways around loss, see Ramesh Kumar, "Alas, Nitrate Didn't Wait, but Does It Really Matter?," *BioScope* 7, no. 1 (2016): 96–115.
6. See, for instance, Aruna Vasudev, *Liberty and Licence in the Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1978).
7. For thick descriptions of the paper trails of colonial film censorship, see Prem Chowdhry, *Colonial India and the Making of Empire Cinema: Image, Ideology and Identity* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2000).
8. *Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee, 1927–1928* (Calcutta: Govt. of India Central Publication Branch, 1928), 1.
9. Monika Mehta, *Censorship and Sexuality in Bombay Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 28.
10. Presidencies were administrative subdivisions of British India. The Bombay Presidency, with its headquarters in Bombay city, included parts of the present-day states of Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka, Sindh in Pakistan, and even Aden in Yemen for a brief period.
11. For details on the objectionable scenes, see Secretary of the BBFC to Ajanta Cinetone, 25 October 1934, file 129/193, Home Dept (Political), Maharashtra State Archives (unless otherwise noted, all government documents cited in this essay are from this state archive).
12. *Mill* song booklet (Bombay: Ajanta Cinetone, 1939). Publicity materials rightly describe this as an unorthodox move because of current property laws wherein Hindu daughters had severely restricted legal rights to inherited property.
13. Plot quotations are from the English-language synopsis in the *Mill* song booklet, circa 1939.
14. S. G. Panandikar to Manager, Ajanta Cinetone, 25 October 1934, file 129/1935, Home Dept (Political).
15. Valentina Vitali, *Hindi Action Cinema: Industries, Narratives, Bodies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 75, 96.

16. Current and Coming Indian Screen Attractions, *Times of India*, May 26, 1939, 14.
17. File 69/1935, n.d., Home Dept (Political).
18. Ajanta Cinetone, chairman, board of directors, to the BBFC, petition, 17 April 1935, file 129/1935, Home Dept (Political). Following this final decision, in March 1935 the BBFC sent notification to several other states, resulting in the film's decertification in Bengal Presidency.
19. Ajanta Cinetone, chairman, board of directors, to the BBFC, petition.
20. S. G. Panandikar, Secretary of BBFC, to Manager, Ajanta Cinetone, 28 March 1935, file 129/1935, Home Dept (Political).
21. Aruna Vasudev, *Liberty and Licence in the Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1978); Poonam Arora, "Imperilling the Prestige of the White Woman": Colonial Anxiety and Film Censorship in British India," *Visual Anthropology Review* 11, no. 2 (1995): 36–50; Priya Jaikumar, *Cinema at the End of Empire: A Politics of Transition in Britain and India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); and Mehta, *Censorship and Sexuality*.
22. Babli Sinha, *Cinema, Transnationalism, and Colonial India: Entertaining the Raj* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 54.
23. See *Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee, 1927–1928*. For commentary, see Chowdhry, *Colonial India*. Priya Jaikumar's examination of the mammoth *Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee* (1928) reveals that under the guise of protecting supposedly impressionable natives from the moral dangers of Western films, the colonial government sought to create a quota for British-made films. The committee's focus on Hollywood and its misinterpretations in the colony were an attempt to counter Hollywood's dominance in the global film trade. See Jaikumar, *Cinema at the End of Empire*.
24. William Mazzarella, *Censorium: Cinema and the Open Edge of Mass Publicity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 58.
25. Nathan D. Golden, "Review of Foreign Film Markets during 1938," *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers* 33 (July 1939): 164.
26. Chowdhry, *Colonial India*.
27. Prem Chowdhry, "Propaganda and Protest: The Myth of the Muslim Menace in an Empire Film (*The Drum*, 1938)," *Studies in History* 16, no. 1 (2000): 109–30, quotation 109.
28. Debashree Mukherjee, "Creating Cinema's Reading Publics: The Emergence of Film Journalism in Bombay," in *No Limits: Media Studies from India*, ed. Ravi Sundaram (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013), 165–98.
29. Mazzarella, *Censorium*, 10.
30. Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, "'The Mill'—But What About 'Mazdoor'?" *Bombay Chronicle*, June 14, 1939, 10. Some of the strike footage is said to have been live actuality footage.
31. See Miriam Bratu Hansen's discussion of Walter Benjamin's idea of "innervation" in "Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street," *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (Winter 1999): 306–43.
32. Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, "Questions of Class: The General Strikes in Bombay, 1928–29," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 33, nos. 1–2 (1999): 205–37.
33. Michele L. Louro and Carolien Stolte, "The Meerut Conspiracy Case in Comparative and International Perspective," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 33, no. 3 (2013): 310–15.
34. File 117/1933, n.d., Home Dept (Pol).

35. Ufa documents cited in Martin Koerber, "Notes of the Proliferation of *Metropolis* (1927)," *Moving Image* 2, no. 1 (2002):73–89. Interestingly, even though the Nazi party was bitterly opposed to the Communist Party, trade unionists, and leftists, *Metropolis*, considered by most to have communist undertones, was one of Goebbels's favorite films. See Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003), 86.
36. "Censors Report for 1926," *Exhibitors Herald*, July 23, 1927, 37.
37. "Fight Red Movies," *Box Office*, May 1, 1937, 78. See also John J. Gladchuk, *Hollywood and Anti-communism: HUAC and the Evolution of the Red Menace, 1935–1950* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
38. The ban is lifted in 1942 when the CPI does an about-face in its stance against the war when the Soviet Union comes under attack in 1941. The *imperial war* is now dubbed the *people's war*.
39. Devidas Madhewji Thakersey to Lord Brabourne, Governor of Bombay, 16 September 1935, file 293/1935, Home (Pol).
40. S. G. Panandikar to General Manager, United Artists Corp, Bombay, 26 March 1935, file 106/1935, Home (Pol.).
41. "Report reviewing the work by the BBFC in 1935," file 61/1936, n.d., Home (Pol.).
42. "Bombay Council Questions," *Times of India*, February 20, 1934, 3.
43. "Film Censors," *Times of India*, March 29, 1935, 15. It is important to note an inaccurate claim that the Jeejeebhoy on the BBFC was also the president of the Bombay Millowner's Association (BMA). In fact, the president of the BMA in those years was Mr. H. P. Mody. See Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, "Writing and Money-Making: Munshi Premchand in the Film Industry, 1934–35," *Contemporary India* 1, no. 1 (March 2002).
44. G. M. Chatterjee, review of *Industrial Labor in India*, *Economic Journal* 44, no. 174 (June 1934): 317–20.
45. Term coined by Doreen Massey; see "Power-Geometry and a Progressive Sense of Place," in *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*, ed. John Bird, Barry Curtis, Tim Putnam, and Lisa Tickner (New York: Routledge, 1993).
46. Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 168–69.
47. Chandavarkar, *Origins*, 168–69.
48. "City and Suburbs," *Times of India*, April 17, 1936, 12.
49. Patrick Geddes cited in Sharada Dwivedi and Rahul Mehrotra, *Bombay: The Cities Within* (Bombay: India Book House, 1995).
50. *Mill* song booklet, circa 1939.
51. The swadeshi (trans. of one's own country) movement first began with the partition of Bengal in 1905 as an effort toward economic nationalism through the use of indigenously produced goods and the boycott of all foreign commodities.
52. See Debashree Mukherjee, "Tracking Utopias: Technology, Labor, and Secularism in Bombay Cinema (1930s–1940s)," in *Media/Utopia: Imagination, History, Technology*, ed. Anupama Rao and Arvind Rajagopal (New York: Routledge, 2016), 81–102.
53. Cited in Carlo Coppola, "Premchand's Address to the First Meeting of the All-India Progressive Writers Association: Some Speculations," *Journal of South Asian Literature* 21, no. 2 (1986): 21–39, quotation 27.

54. Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen, *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 245.
55. Prashant Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis: Colonial Governance and Public Culture in Bombay, 1890–1920* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007); and Sandip Hazareesingh, *The Colonial City and the Challenge of Modernity: Urban Hegemonies and Civic Contestations in Bombay City (1900–1925)* (Hyderabad, AP: Orient Longman, 2007).
56. "Communist Party or persons whose object in leaving India may be presumed to be connected with the furtherance of Communist movement. (b) list of communists, intermediaries etc. who are not to be granted passports without prior reference to H.D.," file 543 (18)F/1928, n.d., Home Dept (Special). Yajnik's silent films have been described as "politically informed melodramas" but there is no trace of these films today. See Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen, *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema* (London, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 38.
57. Ajay Skaria, "Homeless in Gujarat and India: On the Curious Love of Indulal Yagnik," *Indian Social and Economic Review* 38, no. 3 (2001): 271–97.
58. "Ahmedabad Lock-Out: Meaning of the Trouble," *Times of India*, March 15, 1918, 7.
59. M. K. Gandhi, letter to the editor, *Times of India*, March 29, 1918, 10.
60. *Udayer Pathe* was made simultaneously in a Hindi-language version (*Hamrahi*) which did not fare as well at the box office.
61. Balraj Sahni, *Balraj Sahni: An Autobiography*, trans. Ramesh Deshpande (New Delhi: Hind Pocket Books, 1979), 104.
62. Sahni, *Balraj Sahni*, 104.
63. "Neecha Nagar: A Dismal Flop," *Times of India*, December 10, 1949, 10.
64. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 6.
65. This was to be a short-lived government because by September, with the start of World War II, congressional representatives resigned across India to protest the enlisting of colonial India in the Allied war.
66. The film industry representatives were appointed for a one-year term from August 1, 1938, to July 31, 1939. "Bombay Board of Film Censors," *Times of India*, February 23, 1939, 16.
67. "Stay-In Strike in Bombay Mill," *Times of India*, April 13 1939, 17.
68. "Armed Police in Front of Bombay Mill," *Times of India*, May 19, 1939, 11.
69. Advertisement, *Bombay Chronicle*, May 20, 1939, 11.
70. The premiere was even inaugurated by Bhulabhai Desai, leader of the Congress Party in the Central legislature, President of the Bombay Provincial Congress Committee.
71. Mohan Bhavnani to Home Minister K. M. Munshi, 22 May 1939, 1764, Home (Pol). My gratitude to Ravi Vasudevan for sharing this document with me. K. M. Munshi as home minister "was at the forefront of efforts to put down strikes by trade unionists." See Skaria, "Homeless in Gujarat," 275.
72. Abbas, "The Mill," 10.
73. Advertisement, *Times of India*, June 14, 1939, 3.
74. Mazzarella, *Censorium*, 28.
75. Mehta, *Censorship and Sexuality*, 4.

**Debashree Mukherjee** is an assistant professor in the Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian and African Studies at Columbia University. Her forthcoming book, *Bombay Hustle: Making Movies in a Colonial City* (Columbia University Press), presents a material history of film production during Bombay's talkie transition in the 1930s and 1940s.