
Opening the Colonial Film Archive

By Tom Rice

A couple of weeks ago, I picked up an email that had been sent to the address of the colonial film project. It read simply 'Hello, the district officer ID 20034 is my Dad!'

The email refers to [District Officer](#), (1945), which was produced by the Government unit Information Films of India, and which shows the work of an Indian district officer as he mediates local disputes and manages local affairs in the district of Bengal. This 15 minute film is one of more than 6000 catalogued on the [Colonial Film website](#), and one of more than 350 to contain a detailed historical essay (divided into the fields of 'context' and 'analysis'), in this case written by Colin MacCabe.

In his account of *District Officer*, MacCabe argues that the District Officer is presented as 'a man apart', a man 'without family or background - that is to say he is a man outside any history except that of progress.' (1) Through an email correspondence, initiated from this original brief message, we are now able to fill in this background, to glimpse the family and history that the film so carefully omits.

Not only does the email correspondence now identify the District Officer and indeed the filmmaker, it also provides a wealth of contextual information, which invites fresh readings of the film. After further correspondence, we received the unpublished memoir of the District Officer, Samar Sen, which contains a passage on the making of the film. The passage dates the filming to the end of 1943, which alters the context both in relation to the War and the largely unmentioned, but ongoing, Bengal Famine. Sen was serving at the time as the Regional Controller of Procurement of Rice, responsible for buying up rice for the government and distributing it to the starving millions. As Sen notes, 'the procurement of rice which was my specific job did not feature in the film.'[\[2\]](#)

The memoir also discusses the Government's intentions for the film. In contrast to many IFI films, and in particular to their intensely unpopular (but historically fascinating) domestic newsreel [Indian News Parade](#) (1943-1946), *District Officer* was intended primarily for an American audience, so that 'the USA should not misunderstand the British objective in India.' The memoir is also able to provide additional information on the reception of the film - the gap between ideological aim and popular response - as Sen later asked officers in the Ministry of Information about

the film. He was informed that ‘on the first showing in New York there was so much shouting, hooting, and malicious handclapping and cheering that the British authorities had decided to withdraw it forever.’ Sen then explained to the officials his reasons for wanting to know more about this film. ‘As I was the central figure and was going to NY’, he wrote, ‘I wanted to be sure that I would not be mobbed on arrival. There was much mirth all round.’[3]

It is not my objective to discuss the significance of this particular film here, but rather to illustrate the ways in which the open access [colonial film site](#) has initiated an exchange of information between the archives in the UK and the former colonies depicted on screen. Many of these films – particularly the instructional films – sought to relate the colonies back to the imperial centre, whether through maps, intertitles, economic products or through scenes of modern transport and movement across the screen. The colonial film site re-examines this exchange, and moves these rarely seen images from London back to the former colonial territories.

District Officer is one of more than 150 films that are freely available to view on the website without restriction. This sets the project apart from many online projects – for example [InView](#) or [Screenonline](#) – which are restricted to the UK and largely to academic institutions. Colin MacCabe and Lee Grieveson, the co-directors of the project, insisted from the outset that, given the nature of this material (colonial film), these films should not be contained within geographical or institutional boundaries. While recognising the challenges that this presents for the archives (the films are available to stream rather than download), the website helps to introduce and open up these British archives, to make connections across the three archives and to ensure that films and research that previously could only be viewed at a cost in London are accessible beyond what was once the imperial centre.

Despite officially ending almost two years ago, the project receives emails on a daily basis from all parts of the world.[4] The responses can broadly be divided into three categories. Firstly, there are emails either requesting or providing further information about the films. Secondly, a regular stream of emails discuss possible events that the project might collaborate on, for example talks, film screenings, festivals, educational programmes, and tv documentaries. Finally, as in the case of *District Officer*, we receive emails from people who have either identified, or are searching for, people within the films.

The District’s Officer’s son, Jupiter Sen, explained how he came to find the film. ‘I had thought of it [the film] but with no title, the passage of time, and the obscurity of the subject – where would we start to look? Idly

I then went on the internet and that's how I came across it almost immediately under the Colonial Film banner.' For Jupiter Sen, the film now provided a connection to a father and a world that had passed. In an exchange that Andre Bazin would no doubt have enjoyed, Sen discussed his reaction on finding the film. 'It was, I can tell you, a jolt to suddenly see my father at an age when there were not even photographs of him. Strange too for my mother! In fact we asked someone to be with her when she got to see it, in case it was perturbing, but she took it in her stride.'[\[5\]](#)

The films are evidently connected here to issues of memory and to the trope of recognition. A large number of the requests we receive relate to the fascinating war rushes, brilliantly catalogued by the curators at the IWM, as relatives look for 'living flashes' of family members in the unedited Second World War footage. If the Empire is now a more distant and - as many on the project would argue - repressed memory, these films help to connect across time and space (Jupiter Sen noted the comments of his cousin who had watched the film in Dubai) and also, through the contextual essays, between ideological aim and political 'reality'.

The project held monthly seminars, conferences, film seasons and produced two edited book collections, but the academic basis for the project was always the 1000 word historical essays (I wrote 206 of these, but who's counting...)[\[6\]](#) The important point here is that this was never a digitisation project. The digitisation was intended as a way of glimpsing into the collections, of supplementing the historical research. This is increasingly unusual with archival projects, but it was not the intention to merely posit the films on the internet, but rather to curate, contextualise and analyse a selection from the archive. This was particularly important given the sensitive and politically charged nature of this material, but also given the fact that these films are so often about what they are not or, as Colin MacCabe notes, they reveal more through their omissions.[\[7\]](#)

In his essay, MacCabe examines *District Officer* within its historical context, noting the significant omissions from the film ('perhaps the most striking feature of this film is what it does not contain - any explicit discussion of Independence'). 'What is interesting about this particular film', MacCabe adds, 'is how it portrays the liberal imperialist dream of India ruling itself without any British direction but in a completely British manner.' MacCabe further notes here that the most 'evident marker of this absence' is when the District Officer travels to Calcutta to see his superior, a figure not depicted on screen. Samar Sen's memoir reveals that a lengthy sequence was filmed in Calcutta, showing the 'training the Indian Officials had undergone', but this was evidently cut from the final film.[\[8\]](#) The essays thus provide a way to acknowledge what was missing

(the voice of the subaltern) and to recognize disparities between the ideological intent and the social and political situation of the time.

To an extent, the colonial film website is a history of the archives, an institutional record of those films that have come into these three British archives. As the vast majority of the materials preserved are those of the colonial authorities, the essays provide a way to connect to the films, people, audiences and voices, not represented within the corpus.

The format of presenting the academic essay alongside the digitised film also offers an online model for studying and analysing the films. As the vast majority of these films fall outside established film canons, the juxtaposition of academic essay and film invites further reexaminations of these rarely seen films. We were, perhaps naively, unaware at the outset how important the digitised footage would be in drawing readers to the academic essays. However, we were acutely aware that in selecting the digitised films the project was potentially creating a new canon or, at least, directing future students in their research. History is written by the archives, dictated by the material that is readily available and privileged. In selecting the 350 films that would receive 'enhanced entries' (the historical entries) and the 150 films that would be digitised, the project merged idealistic aims with the more practical considerations.

So how did we select these 'enhanced entries'? In writing historical essays, we sought to select at least one film from each colony, across the spectrum of dates from 1896 to 1997. Some examples were outstanding because of what they showed (for example [footage](#) of Mau Mau or Gandhi's release from incarceration), while others assumed significance from a film perspective (for example previously unseen Basil Wright [footage](#) from British Guiana). We would also consider the audiences here. Who was this film made for? Where was this shown? For example, the site includes the only three surviving films of the [Bekefilm](#) experiment (1935-1937), which contains some of the earliest films made specifically for African audiences. Yet, often these considerations were accompanied by more practical demands - is there a viewing copy of the film? What do we know about this film or what do we think we might find here? Given the scale of the collection, it was neither practical nor possible to view the entire corpus.

The project was also eager to ensure that the digitised films were representative of the collection, rather than simply the outstanding or unique examples. As all of us on the project would attest, not every film was a gem. There are tropes and patterns across the corpus and our entries and digitisation needed to acknowledge this, rather than skewer the corpus by prioritising the exceptional 5% and making the exceptional

the norm. There were further practical decisions here. Is this film available elsewhere? Is this film of interest to other audience groups (for example in different countries or disciplines)? Is this film commercially lucrative (and if so does the archive want it online)? What condition is the film in (is there any money to preserve or restore)? Which version should we put up? Perhaps most crucially, who owns the rights to this film and can we put this online? Thanks to the fantastic support and perseverance of the archives, we were eventually able to include the vast majority of our chosen films.

These decisions also informed (and were informed by) the design of the site, as we considered the various ways in which scholars and the general public might approach these films. The interactive map became the visual navigator for the site, but the films are grouped not only by country and date, but also by production company, by theme (for example '[Empire and Health](#)'), genre and historical events. We wrote lengthy essays on the most significant of these production companies (for example, [Gold Coast Film Unit](#), [Jamaica Film Unit](#), [Information Films of India](#)).

The earlier example of *District Officer* is a far from isolated example of the ways in which the colonial project has moved images beyond national and institutional boundaries in order to better understand these films. As a final example, early in the project the BFI posted a film, [Springtime in an English Village](#), on its YouTube channel. The film depicts an African girl that is crowned May Queen in an English village. Initially little was known about this film. It was dated as 1948 and there was no information on the location or the personnel. However, after finding an article in *Colonial Cinema* magazine, we were able to date the film to 1944, specify the village depicted (Stanion, Northamptonshire) and provide information on the production company, the Colonial Film Unit, which made films specifically for African audiences. This information not only reshaped our reading of the film - as a part of the British Government's war propaganda for the colonies - but also now brought the film to viewers directly connected to the events depicted on screen.

A few months later, one of the curators at the BFI noticed a comment that had been posted beneath the film on the [BFI YouTube page](#). It was sent from the daughter of the May Queen depicted on screen, who was now living in Maryland (it should be noted that not all YouTube comments are so helpful). The BFI contacted mother and daughter, and this led both to [interviews](#) with the 'May Queen' about her experiences, and also contact with friends from her time as an evacuee in the village 60 years earlier. Mother and daughter have since revisited Stanion. While long lost reunification was not a stated aim of the project, it does reiterate the ways in which these films can connect across space and time, but also the importance of contextualising and curating these digitised film

materials.[9]

Endnotes:

Colonial Film: Moving Images of the British Empire was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (2007-2010). The project united universities (Birkbeck and University College London) and archives (British Film Institute, Imperial War Museum and the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum) to create a new catalogue of films relating to the British Empire. See www.colonialfilm.org.uk.

[1] MacCabe, Colin, 'District Officer', *Colonial Film: Moving Images of the British Empire*, 2010, <http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk/node/1331>, accessed on 30 April 2012.

[2] Sen, Samar, 'I Make a Film', an extract from an unpublished memoir received from Jupiter Sen, April 2012.

[3] *Ibid.*; email correspondence with Jupiter Sen, April 2012.

[4] The end point here is marked as the moment when the funding for the project ceased. It was at this date that the website was launched online. As many other projects will recognise, it is at this moment of 'completion', a moment when no-one is employed on the project, that the project becomes most visible to the public.

[5] The story has now taken a further unexpected turn. Since writing this,

I have received a further email from Jupiter Sen, who was reading David Faber's biography of Leo Amery, *Speaking for England*, when he came across a picture taken at an Oxford Union debate in 1939. 'Looking at the picture', Sen explained, 'I suddenly focused on the figure sitting behind the standing Julian [Amery] and I'm afraid I can only say that it has a remarkable resemblance to the images of my father as a young man in the *District Officer*! My sister is convinced it is him and the dates tally as he was at Oxford at that time, certainly in England.'

[6] The review process was an extensive one. Every one of these essays was read, and corrected, by both the project co-directors, by the senior archivist at either the IWM or BFI and then proof read after corrections by another senior archivist at the BFI.

[7] We did discuss the possibility of inviting comments on the films, but given the nature of the material and the difficulties of moderating the site after the project had officially finished, we decided against this.

[8] MacCabe, 2010, <http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk/node/1331>; Sen, 'I Make a Film'.

[9] Rice, Tom, 'Springtime in an English Village', *Colonial Film: Moving Images of the British Empire*, 2010, <http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk/node/1923>. For more on this story, see Vanessa Thorpe, 'Propaganda Coup of Britain's First Black May Queen', *The Observer*, 21 June 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jun/21/black-may-queen-youtube>.

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