

EAP1262: Preserving the History of Indian Cinema through Digitising Early Urdu Film Magazines

Principal Investigator: Vaibhav Singh, Shabistan Film Archive
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£15,000 for 12 months

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About the project

The documents surveyed here are held by the Shabistan Film Archive in Bangalore (Bengaluru), India. They were acquired from a rare book dealer in Lucknow, India, named Mazhar 'Alam (known by his pen name, Tajassus-e 'Ijazi). They primarily consist of Urdu film magazines published in Calcutta (now Kolkata) in the 1930s.

India (like South Asia more broadly) is linguistically diverse, and its film cultures reflect that diversity. The Hindi film industry, based in Bombay (now Mumbai), was and is the largest of India's film industries, and Hindi films have historically been the most broadly distributed within India, as well as outside it. However, it is crucial to understand that the 'Hindi' linguistic label obscures as much as it reveals. Since the first talkies were produced in India, with the 1931 *Alam Ara*, Indian films have been aural as well as visual media, and thus the relationship between Hindi and Urdu, which has been the focus of much controversy since the late nineteenth century, is put in abeyance to some degree in the film context. At various times, the language has been referred to as Hindi, Urdu, or Hindustani; but since films have generally been made in the widely intelligible *khari boli* dialect (i.e., a language variety that is neither strongly regional nor highly marked with Sanskrit or Perso-Arabic vocabulary), the label is more or less arbitrary. Where it comes to the written word, however, the differences are significant, since Hindi is generally written in the Devanagari script and Urdu is generally written in the Nasta'liq variant of the Arabic script. In the 1930s (and later), when most of the materials surveyed here were produced, many of the people involved in producing and watching Hindi-Urdu films were more comfortable with the Nasta'liq script and Persianised vocabulary associated with the label 'Urdu' than with the Devanagari script and Sanskritised vocabulary associated with 'Hindi' (Bhaumik 2001; Lunn 2015; Mukherjee 2015; Thomas 2013).

After the introduction of talkies, the Hindi-Urdu film industry and the nascent film press quickly became concentrated in Bombay. Nonetheless, Calcutta and Lahore continued for some time as significant centers for the production of Hindi-Urdu films (Gooptu 2011; Siddique 2017). The production triangle of Hindi-Urdu cinema that spanned Bombay, Calcutta, and Lahore was to change irrevocably with partition, and many publications and films from Lahore are believed to be lost forever. The periodicals surveyed here were largely published in Calcutta, with the exception of one very rare publication from Lahore, and represent a valuable record of an undivided Hindi-Urdu film culture. While Bombay was increasingly the major center for Hindi-Urdu film

production, and a more important site for Urdu publishing than Calcutta, these publications offer an off-centre vantage-point of colonial-era Hindi-Urdu film culture.

As scholars have noted, Indian film journalism has not been widely studied, although this is starting to change (Mukherjee 2020; for exceptions, see Dwyer 2004; Mukherjee 2019). This is all the more so for Urdu materials, which are less accessible and less widely read than those in other languages, especially English (however, see Siddique 2019; Taj 2020; for translations of selections from these publications and from the memoirs of an Urdu film journalist of the early 1940s, see Abbasi 2018; Ansari 2017; Manto 2014). In keeping with its mission of preserving and making available South Asia's film heritage, the Shabistan Film Archive acquired a cache of early Urdu film magazines and digitised them with the support of the EAP1262 pilot grant. The scanning work was carried out by Aditi Rajeev and the publications were catalogued by David Boyk. The magazines surveyed here, which were lithographed and circulated in relatively small numbers, appealed to film fans as well as to those in the business of production or exhibition. Often richly illustrated with photographs, they included reviews, biographies, technical information, and literary texts that might or might not be connected to film. Many of the authors and editors were themselves involved in the film industry. These publications are fascinating and entertaining documents of their time, and essential resources for understanding the early talkie era in South Asia; we look forward to seeing the new interpretations that they enable.

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The publications

Series01_Books contains only one document, a book titled *Film o Drama (Film and Drama)*, which contains short articles on Indian actors and filmmakers, illustrated with photographs (largely headshots). It was written by Owais Ahmad, pen name 'Adib,' and published in 1938, apparently by the Indian Press in the city of Allahabad.

Series02_Booklets also contains only one document. Unlike the other documents surveyed, this is in English and concerns the British and American film industries. It is a booklet included with the 1 October 1932 issue of British fan magazine *The Picturegoer*, and includes photos of English-language film stars appearing as romantic couples.

The bulk of the materials are included in *Series03_Magazines*. These are organized into three files, *File01_Akkas*, *File02_Various*, and *File03_Film_Review*; this reflects the fact that they were acquired as three bound volumes, each including a number of magazine issues. With one exception, all of the magazines contained here were published in Calcutta. A small and arbitrary selection of interesting pages are noted below.

File01_Akkas includes sixteen issues of 'Akkas (*Cameraman*)' magazine, published between 1936 and 1940. It seems to have begun publication in 1936. During these years, 'Akkas' was published and edited by M.M. Begg (M.M. Beg) and printed at the Excelsior Art Press and Calcutta Central Press. Among other kinds of articles, it featured reviews and synopses of new films, profiles and photographs of actors (the photographs sometimes labeled in English), poetry, jokes, essays on the social significance of cinema. An article titled 'A Page from Greta Garbo's Life,' by 'a childhood friend,' is printed on *EAP1262_File01_Akkas_0642–0643* ('Akkas', December 1937). *EAP1262_File01_Akkas_0643* also includes a *ghazal* (poem) by the poet Natiq Lakhnavi. The last two issues in the collection, from 1940, include English-language supplements.

File02_Various contains eight issues of *Film Riviyu (Film Review)*, two issues of *Filmistan* (published in Lahore), and two issues of *Film Istar (Film Star)*. All of these issues are from the early 1930s. *Film Review* (also included in *File03_Film_Review*), which called itself "eastern India's first illustrated film magazine," began publication in 1930 and was published and edited at various times by 'Abdurrauf ('Abd al-Rauf) and Y.K. Tawrique (Y.K. Tariq). *EAP1262_File02_Various_0014–0015* (*Film Review*, January 1932) is an article on the new film adaptation of Kalidas's Sanskrit play *Shakuntala*. In the same issue, *EAP1262_File02_Various_0018–0019* is an article in praise of Charlie Chaplin and *EAP1262_File02_Various_0022–0026* includes capsule histories of numerous Indian film production companies. *EAP1262_File02_Various_0197* (*Film Review*, May and June 1932) encourages readers to visit Happy Park, an amusement park in Calcutta, if they are

tired of sitting in the dark watching nonsensical bioscopes or getting annoyed with crying children and coughing in talkie films. *EAP1262_File02_Various_0204–0205* (also *Film Review*, May and June 1932) features a report on cinema in Japan.

EAP1262_File02_Various_0313–0314 (*Film Review*, September 1932) features an article called 'Cinema in a Church,' which reports on the author's visit to a combined church and cinema in Lambeth Road, London (Reverend Thomas Tiplady's Ideal Cinema), where he saw a film shot by the heir apparent (Edward VIII) during a visit to Africa.

EAP1262_File02_Various_0315–0317 explains how talkies are made.

EAP1262_File02_Various_0322 (*Film Review*, October 1932) is a breathless ad for 'The Happy World Show' at the Varma Amusement Park, featuring a merry-go-round, 'chairplane,' giant wheel, radio, well of death, and many other delights.

The file contains two issues of *Filmistan*, which was published from Lahore and called itself 'the leader of the Indian film industry.' Like other publications from Punjab, *Filmistan* includes more articles by non-Muslim authors than contemporary Urdu publications from other parts of India. One issue was edited by 'Hindi' (whom other sources call Bashir Hindi), and the other by Jamil Sikravi. The collection contains the short story special issue, which seems to date from the early 1930s, and the December 1932 issue. *EAP1262_File02_Various_0383–0387* (*Filmistan*, short-story number) is a story called 'Sinama ki Ek Sham' ('A Night at the Cinema') by the well known writer Niyaz Fatehpuri. An article on Chinese films appears on *EAP1262_File02_Various_0459–0461* (*Filmistan*, December 1932).

The final publications in the file are the first two issues of *Film Istar* (*Film Star*), published in 1932 and 1933 by Tamim Rashidi. This magazine includes the usual mix of news, reviews, commentary, and photographs. An article titled 'Maghribi Film men Mashriqi Manzar-Numa'i' ('Portrayals of the East in Western Film') begins on *EAP1262_File02_Various_0490* (*Film Star*, December 1932). Beginning on *EAP1262_File02_Various_0525* (*Film Star*, April 1933), an illustrated article reprinted from *Film Review* describes make-up techniques.

File03_Film_Review contains eleven issues of *Film Review*, predating those found in *File02_Various* (note that the last issue in the volume, for December 1930, predates most of the others). *EAP1262_File03_Film_Review_0085* (*Film Review*, January 1931) lists various actresses' real names and ethnicities. *EAP1262_File03_Film_Review_0223* (*Film Review*, May 1931) features an illustrated advertisement for the film *Bakavali*, in which the actress Miss Gulab plays both female and male roles. A photo of the famous Jewish actress Sulochana (Ruby Myers) and an article about her rise to fame are featured in *EAP1262_File03_Film_Review_0257–0258*. An article about *Alam Ara*, the first Indian talkie, begins on *EAP1262_File03_Film_Review_0283* (*Film Review*, July 1931).

EAP1262_File03_Film_Review_0370 (*Film Review*, August–September 1931) features an advertisement for *Alam Ara*. *EAP1262_File03_Film_Review_0399* (*Film Review*, October 1931) features an advertisement petitioning the government to make onscreen kissing illegal.