

# Moving portraits and interactive voices from the British Raj

The study of South Asian colonial amateur films and of oral history archives provides a particular insight into imperial identities that is not necessarily evident from other sources. The Centre of South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge, has recently made available online 280 films and 300 interviews documenting lesser-known aspects of the British rule in South Asia (see [www.admin.cam.ac.uk/news/dp/2010030401](http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/news/dp/2010030401)). The Centre's online archives represent a timely and singular contribution to the current scholarship concerned with renewed negotiations of Britain's imperial past and its relevance to today's multicultural society.

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THE UNCENSORED VISUAL AND AURAL RECORDS of colonial India held in The Centre of South Asian Studies' online archives include at the moment 500 hours of interviews given by British and Indian members of the former British Raj and 80 hours of colonial amateur films made by British people serving at various outposts across South and South-East Asia between 1911 and 1956. This is the first stage of an ongoing project run by the Centre with a view to gradually digitise and broadcast further 150 films and 100,000 photographs. The recent online launch of both film and oral collections is the result of an archival effort started over forty years ago by the Centre's then director, Mr. Ben Farmer. He was joined in 1967 by Mary Thatcher who became, and remained for almost two decades, the driving force behind the Centre. Ms. Thatcher showed an unrelenting commitment to the identification, preservation, cataloguing and research of papers, photographs, films and interviews illuminating the lives of many British and Indian people who lived through the last decades of colonial India. Today, the Centre holds written and visual documents of significant historic merit and the archival team, lead by Dr Kevin Greenbank, is gradually developing innovative educational programmes alongside the ongoing digitization of the collections.

The documentary relevance of the Centre's online archives subscribes to today's growing interest in imperial studies with a particular focus on countries such as India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Burma, Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong. These films and interviews operate at various interpretative levels and invite new analytical avenues and methodologies. For instance, they challenge stereotypical representations of British and Indian colonial identities while inviting renewed analysis of gender and racial dynamics. Also, through particular cases of imperial spectatorial gaze they show unwitting representations of both Indian and British 'subaltern' voices.

One of the key features of the Centre's online archives is the full-length broadcast of each collection. While most archives are making available online only excerpts from their film and interviews, the Centre is providing researchers with immediate and unedited access to its collections while gradually building cross-referential links within its digital

databases. Some of these cross-references are found on topics such as the building and operating of Indian railways, bridges and irrigation infrastructures,<sup>1</sup> tea plantations,<sup>2</sup> military operations,<sup>3</sup> and the work of several British and Indian people alongside Mahatma Gandhi.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the Centre's online archives are supported by invaluable background information found across in-house collections of photographs, South Asian newspapers, government microfilms, maps, and the donors' files.

To date, over 300 interviews (see [www.s-asian.cam.ac.uk/audio.html](http://www.s-asian.cam.ac.uk/audio.html)) and 280 colonial amateur films (see [www.s-asian.cam.ac.uk/films.html](http://www.s-asian.cam.ac.uk/films.html)) are accessible on the Centre's website. The online oral archive highlights include, for instance, 120 interviews with former members of the Indian National Congress and of the Swaraj Party, as well as interviews with Roman Catholic and Anglican missionaries, former tea planters, railway engineers, members of the Indian Colonial Service and with British people who stayed on after the Indian Independence. While some of the colonial amateur films show details of mundane colonial life, others contain scenes of British rescue operations from Burma into India during World War II (the *Mackrell* collection); repairs to railways in Sind in 1934 (the *Berridge* collection); processions of Masonic lodges in Calcutta in 1927 (the *Studd* collection); scenes of Toda communities in the Nilgiri Hills in 1930 (the *Buchanan* collection); the marriage of the Maharaj Kumar of Patiala in 1932 (the *Wilson-Pemberton* collection); and relief operations in Punjab during the Partition of India in August 1947 (the *Williams* and *Burt* collections).

#### Imperial and postcolonial counter narratives

The documentary relevance of the Centre's online intertwined resources becomes evident across several collections providing either complementing or contrasting information on specific themes. One such theme is the representation of British and Indian women on film and how conventional means of portraying their ways of life are often contradicted by the women's oral testimonies. Thus, scenes showing an alleged carefree life, leisure activities and sports enjoyed by the memsahibs –wives of Indian Civil Servants,<sup>5</sup> military or political officers –contrast

with some of their recollections of colonial times. For instance, in an interview from 1978, Mrs. Marjorie Hall describes her experience as the wife of a British military officer posted to Jacobabad in the early 1940s in terms of 'We were so busy surviving... [the British government] had no right to post families to places like that, it was criminal. You got up in the morning, you died in the afternoon, you were buried at night, [all] because you went bad so quickly.'<sup>6</sup>

A similar contrasting narrative is found when interpreting representations of Indian women across different visual and oral collections. Recurrent scenes of Indian women shown as *Ayahs* (child minders), tea pickers, poor villagers, or wives of Indian civil servants, would never convey the educational and political commitments of many Indian women. However, Indian women's political agency becomes evident in some of their interviews as is the case with Mrs. Savitri Madan's interview from 1970 (no. 147). A former teacher and village-industry specialist, she describes her work with women *satyagrahis* (nonviolent resistance activists) in inter-war Sialkot and Lahore, and her interest in Mahatma Gandhi's movement of Basic Education, particularly when she taught the children how to 'think in a way in which they could not only participate in their own development but [also] in the development of the[ir] country.'

Another example of counter narrative emerges when comparing scenes of the Indian Army with interviews describing the ideological dynamic among the ranks. Inter-war film scenes showing Indian Army parading, marching and undertaking military training find a new interpretative dimension when contextualised alongside oral records describing lesser-known social and political details. As a result, illustrative scenes of the 14th Battalion Rajputana Rifles from the *Barton* film collection, or of the 2nd/10th Gurkha Rifles from the *Taylor* film collection, are ideologically counteracted by various testimonies given by British and Indian military and political officers. For instance, Mr Nilubhai Limaye, a former member of the Samyukt Socialist Party, mentions the attitude of the Indian Army towards the Indian independence as 'very cold' and 'that most of them did not know that there was such a movement going on in the country'.<sup>7</sup>

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There are also examples of interrelated visual and oral sources that supply the researcher with multilayered, complementing background information. One such case is offered by the *Davy* film collection and by Mr. C. H. Barry's interview from 1983 (no. 008), both documenting in great detail the inter-war life and activities of Indian students enrolled at the Aitchison College, Lahore. The two films from the *Davy* collection, made by an unidentified filmmaker in the 1930s, show the College at a time when the Principal was C. H. Barry. While the films show general views of the College's grounds and buildings, scenes of sports, horse shows, swimming, gymnastics and field hockey, Mr Barry's recollections reveal the critical situation he faced when appointed as the Principal of the College in May 1933. At that time, he was offered the job with the caveat that the College 'is bankrupt both in terms of numbers and finance. It is virtually bankrupt educationally. This is a last, desperate attempt to see whether it can be salvaged. We shan't blame you if it collapses because it's more than likely that it will.' The interwar film scenes and Mr Barry's interview illustrate an important, and ultimately successful, decade in the history of an educational institution launched primarily to serve the Punjab's princes and the sons of landed aristocracy and zemindars.

#### New contribution to digital humanities

By providing direct and uncensored access to original footage and interviews, the Centre of South Asian Studies facilitates and supports online scholarship reliant on critical practices engaged with the (re)production and representation of colonial memory, as well as with the re-assessment of how the past is continually reinscribed in the present. The Centre's online dissemination of its collections mediates new debates about patterns of inclusion/exclusion inherent to identity building and colonial, racial, gender, class, religious and political discourse. It also proposes alternative ways of discussing issues of displacement, British Diaspora and social acculturation. At the same time, amateur ethnographic records such as the *Buchanan* or *Hopkinson* film collections raise issues about the shifting relationship between official accounts and visual representations of colonial control. Across the Centre's online collections can be identified several representational patterns

**Above:**  
Berridge collection.  
Bombay-Madras  
railway, ca.1930s.  
**Right:**  
Henson collection.  
Jubbhal, India, ca.1915.



corresponding to various forms of collective colonial knowledge and to trends in post-colonial acts of remembrance. Moreover, they intertwine narratives of coexistence and conflict within a continuous re-writing of historical contexts by challenging patterns of reproduction and contestation of imperial collective memory. This way, colonial and postcolonial identities are constantly negotiated from multidisciplinary perspectives with social and political perspectives drawing on visual, anthropological and psychoanalytical theories.

Overall, the Centre's online collections represent records of public and private colonial memory and offer outstanding insights into imperial ways of life. Their relevance to the imperial studies curriculum illuminates the entwined British and Indian collective memory and challenges stereotypical representations of the two colonial identities and cultures. The comparative analysis of these films and interviews reveals novel imperial gender and racial dynamics, while the identification of particular instances of colonial visual rhetoric and postcolonial memorialization proposes new methods of interpretation and acknowledgement of colonial societies. Thus, as first person narratives of specific times and events, the Centre's colonial amateur films and postcolonial interviews advocate for the renegotiation of Britain's imperial memory and past.

Lastly, the Centre's online collections offer a palimpsest of documentary resources that presents illuminating imperial as well as post-colonial ideological and cultural frameworks. The examples discussed here show how the Centre's cross-

referential online archival resources invite renewed research of means of production and re-imagining of imperial memory, and how these visual and aural digital collections advance interconnected methodologies of critical literacy in the field of digital humanities.

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#### Notes

1. See the Berridge and Stokes film collections, the W.S. Benton and E.P. Mainprice photographic collections, and Brig. R.E. Gardiner's interview (no 270).
2. See the Grant film collection and the F.G. Alderson-Smith's interview (no 007).
3. See the Barclay film collection and G. Sweeney papers.
4. See, for instance, Miss Anu Bandhopadhyaya's interview (no.105) about touring with Mahatma Gandhi across East Bengal following the outbreak of communal riots. See also, E.B.H. Baker papers.
5. See, in particular, the Kendall film collection.
6. See Interview no. 013.
7. See interview no. 148, 1970. Also, for records about the Indian National Army (INA) see S.A. Ayer's interview (no. 172) about the Azad Hind Cabinet of Subhas Chandra Bose, and Mr Cyril Stracey's interview (no. 036) in which he comments on the formation of the INA.