

A Familiar Beat

The fascinating story of how and why *The Drum*, a film glorifying the British Empire, ended up being banned in parts of India, 80 years before the controversy over *Padmaavat*.

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In 1938, *The Drum*, a film set in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) of British India, was released in the UK, the US and India, then part of the British Empire. Even though that was 80 years ago, the reception that *The Drum* received when it was released in India is reminiscent of the issues raised by the recent protests against the film *Padmaavat*—of identities and rights, of censorship and the freedom of expression. *Padmaavat* tells the story of how Alauddin Khilji attacked a Rajput kingdom in the 14th century after being smitten by the queen, who ultimately commits *jouhar* after her husband dies in battle. Caste groups claiming to represent Rajputs protested against the film even before it was released in late January 2018, wrongly presuming that it showed a scene depicting Khilji's dream in which he becomes intimate with the queen.

A British film made by the Hungary-born brothers Alexander and Zoltan Korda, *The Drum* was part of their Empire series of films, which included *Sanders of the River* (1935), *The Elephant Boy* (1937) and *The Four Feathers* (1939). The four films were based on works set in the distant colonies, where a Manichaean juxtaposition of values, ideals and almost every aspect of life sought to highlight British rule and how beneficial colonialism was.

The Drum was based on a novel by the prolific British writer Alfred Edward Woodley Mason (1865–1948), whose works, along with those by Rudyard Kipling and Edgar Wallace, were a favourite for Empire film-makers such as the Kordas. Mason is especially credited with a series of detective novels featuring Inspector Hanaud, whom the writer created as a rival to Sherlock Holmes and who was, in many ways, a predecessor to Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot.

The Drum was set in a fictitious province of Tokot in the NWFP, in particular the region around Peshawar, already a volatile region, because of the presence of numerous Pashtun ethnic groups there and its proximity to Afghanistan. In the story, the king is murdered by his younger brother, the Oxford-educated Prince Ghul, who is keen to rally his followers against the British in the name of religion and regionalism so that he can claim independence and the throne for himself. However, his nephew, the real heir, Prince Azim, is a thorn in his flesh, and a confrontation becomes certain when Azim is rescued by a British military officer called Carruthers.

Shot in Technicolor, the film brought to life, as critics said, the rugged, harsh beauty of the region. The film also offset

the very different worlds of “east” and “west,” to use Kipling's terminology, most notably in the portrayal of characters and values: the Pathans were fratricidal, jealous, manipulative, cruel, debauched and set in old ways and habits, as opposed to the British, who were heroic, gallant and willing to make sacrifices to protect the young and innocent. Film historians have written about *The Drum* and the repercussions of its release in subcontinental affairs, such as Prem Chowdhry in *Colonial India and the Making of Empire Cinema* (2000), Priya Jaikumar in *Cinema at the End of Empire: A Politics of Transition in Britain and India* (2006) and Babli Sinha in the more recent *Cinema Transnationalism and Colonial India* (2013).

British authorities and film-makers hoped this film would showcase the Empire's power and glory. In some ways, it was also intended to rival the reach of Hollywood films.

Indeed, the 1927 Cinematograph Films Act sought to provide numerous advantages to British films across the Empire over American ones, not just in ensuring that cinemas screen a requisite quota of British-made films, but also in terms of duties to be paid and the permissions required before screening.

By 1938, the flaws of the act were already clear, and by the time *The Drum* was released, steps had been taken to remove from the act's purview films made by nations within the Empire, that is, the colonies. *The Drum* became another reason

for India's nascent film-makers to agitate, since they were hard-pressed to compete against the slick films and better integrated film industry of Britain and the US. But it was in quite other stormy, volatile ways that *The Drum* encountered opposition in British India, mainly in Mumbai and Chennai. *The Drum's* release in the bigger cities occurred in the background of a series of violent events.

Riots and Violence

The subcontinent was in several senses better connected than before, thanks to the growing presence of newspapers in various languages, the railways and the movement of migrant labour. The Pathans, for instance, made up a noticeable part of the labour force in Mumbai, working as foremen or sardars in mills, moneylenders and stevedores at the port. It was also a time when the NWFP as well as Punjab saw several riots and incidents of violence.

In the previous decade, as publications abounded, there was scurrilous writing in Hindi and Urdu on both sides

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that incited violence. Following the publication of articles in the book *Rangila Rasul* and the journal *Risala Vartman* disparaging Islam, riots broke out in Lahore in 1927. Eight years later, in 1935, the contested Shahid Ganj mosque was demolished by a Sikh group following a long stand-off against groups of Muslims, leading to riots.

A year later, in the NWFP's Bannu district, a case of a Hindu girl and a Pathan youth eloping caused an uproar in the entire region. When the cause was taken up by a local leader, Mirza Ali Khan, who called himself the Fakir of Ipi, his hometown, it led to several disparate Pashtun groups banding together against Hindus for the cause of Islam. The girl in question, who had accepted Islam and who was now called Islam bibi, as reported in most newspapers, was "returned" by the police to her parents.

But the case was to take several twists and turns, almost paralleling certain modern-day instances. The local magistrate's court in Bannu ordered her to be placed in the care of a third party, a respectable Muslim family in the area, but the bigger court in Peshawar ordered that she be returned to her parents, and then a court of appeals again reversed this decision. In this complex game of judicial seesawing, the Pashtun ethnic groups, mainly a group called the Waziris, rallied under Mirza Ali Khan's leadership and ensured a boycott of Hindu traders, and sporadically attacked British establishments, as the Pakistani historian Farah Gul Baqai has described in her paper for the National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research in Islamabad.

Anger at how the locals were portrayed in the film, and especially their humiliating defeat, namely Prince Ghul's, and servility, namely Prince Azim's, helped flame a wider anger. Narrower, localised sentiments fed into a broader movement, uniting diverse Muslim groups and tangentially appealing to feelings of nationalism. But the protests were never violent and drew on Gandhi's ways of peaceful picketing to stop people from entering cinema halls.

It was in Mumbai that the group called the Muslim Naujawans led marches in the early days of September 1938, from Azad Maidan towards the cinema halls of Excelsior and New Empire, and picketed the entrances, leading to arrests and a police baton charge. They were led by Aziz Mohammad Laljee, and the protestors were a disparate group of largely Muslim protestors drawn mainly from the working classes.

The contradictions in what drew the protestors were also interesting, as have been noted by film historians. *The Drum* was made in English, and as with similar movies, its audience was diverse, despite the ostensible difference in class—the English-speaking elite in the balcony areas, and the cheaper seats for the locals, many of whom did not know English. It was evident that films as a medium of entertainment were now increasingly popular and accessible across classes.

The protestors who marched against *The Drum* were not opposed to the film per se, but were against the perceived

insult to the various concentric communities to which they belonged, that is, the Pashtuns, the Muslims and by extension, the long-dominated Indians. It was a grievance that simply added itself to a litany of similarly perceived threats to religion, and community. When the Muslim Naujawans protested against the derogatory portrayal of the Pathans, Muslims and Indians, the police commissioner, who was a member of the censor board, dismissed their concerns, advising the group that they were free to disseminate propaganda to the contrary and to correct any "wrong" impressions the film fostered, in the same vein as critics of those who protested against *Padmaavat*.

Banned

These protests, in fact, came at a convenient time for Indian film-makers, who made up a small, yet articulate, group. Already aware of changes imminent in the Cinematograph Act, which would be implemented that very year, that is, in 1938, they knew that they would find competing against Hollywood hard from then on.

The protests against the film only grew. The agitation spread down the Konkan, the coastal strip between the sea and the Western Ghats that ran from Mumbai to Goa, which had a substantial Muslim population. The British had allowed a measure of temporary autonomy in the Government of India



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Act in 1935 and the provinces were ruled by elected parties. The Congress-led government in Bombay Province (Presidency until 1936) was first criticised for not being involved in the matter, but the increased disturbances led to the home minister's intervention.

Though he saw the film and, as Chowdhry writes, pointed to several objectionable issues, such as the call for jihad raised by Prince Ghul and the abject servility of Prince Azim, who would rather destroy his kingdom to seek friendship with the British, the protests were seen largely as a law-and-order issue. It was in this light that the Congress-led governments in Mumbai and Chennai, which had also seen some agitation, banned the film. In Bengal, too, where a coalition of the Krishak Praja Party and the Muslim League was in power, the film was banned.

Soon afterwards, in events partly related to *The Drum's* reception, the censor board, as Monika Mehta writes in her book *Censorship and Sexuality in Bombay Cinema*, was re-constituted, with the police commissioner removed as the head. Censors were also advised from this point onwards to be careful of "Indian sentiments."

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