

Home movies chronicling end of Empire released online

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(PhysOrg.com) -- A collection of almost 300 films which offer a unique glimpse of life in India and other parts of South Asia during the final days of the British Empire has been released online.

The archive, which is owned by Cambridge University's Centre of South Asian Studies, will be available from Thursday (March 4th) at www.s-asian.cam.ac.uk/films.html , where users will be able to watch and download the footage for free.

It contains approximately 50 different private collections, all made by people who lived and worked in [India](#) and other parts of Asia between 1911 and 1956, just as British rule in the region was coming to a close.

The silent films cover a huge range of topics, including harrowing scenes shot during the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, images of labourers working on railways and dams, and pictures of the funeral of Lord Brabourne, a former Governor of Bombay and Bengal, in 1939.

They also open a window both on to some of the lesser-studied facets of Imperial history, such as women's experiences in colonial India; and aspects which otherwise would simply have gone unrecorded.

Alongside stereotypical images of dignitaries attending official events or spending a day at the races, viewers will be able to watch royal weddings, tribal dances, people working on farms and children playing or going to

school.

"It's one thing to get an understanding of a place by reading about it or visiting 60 years later; to be able to see people at the time and watch events such as partition actually taking place before your own eyes is quite another," Dr. Kevin Greenbank, archivist at the Centre of South Asian Studies, said.

"The films are the equivalent of modern-day home videos. This makes the collection particularly valuable because it shows some of the things which aren't recorded in documents or books - like the interactions between people, or the way that the British behaved towards their servants. It's a fascinating resource for analysing how these two societies, British and Indian, worked - or perhaps didn't work - together."

The films were shot on 8mm or 16mm reel and have not been extensively available or used until now. In some cases, they had never been viewed until they were digitised.

They were originally gathered by Mary Thatcher, the Centre's first archivist. In the 1960s, she set about compiling an archive of memoirs of the British in India, while many of those who had witnessed the sun's setting on the Empire were still alive.

After one interviewee offered her a collection of old films which he otherwise planned to burn, Thatcher also began asking for old reels, eventually amassing almost 80 hours of unique moving images from the era.

"Amateur films have only recently become an accepted academic research topic, and material from the colonial age has received less attention than other areas of study," Dr. Annamaria Motrescu, an

affiliated scholar at the Centre, who oversaw much of the digitisation project, said.

"Nowadays, home movie-making is an accepted part of many people's lives. For school children, watching home movies from the 1930s in India is an opportunity to see images documenting a time in a different manner than other sources, a historic time that in some cases is still shrouded in stereotypical representations."

Some of the most moving clips appear in two collections which deal with partition. The division of Pakistan from India took place in August 1947 and displaced millions of people. Hundreds of thousands died in widespread violence as Muslims and Hindus both raced to cross the borders and settle among a religious majority.

The archive contains clips taken both from the air and the ground showing trains crammed with emigrants trying to reach safety. Scenes from refugee camps bring home the scale of the tragedy, with pictures of the sick and dying, corpses being pecked at by vultures and the digging of mass graves.

Elsewhere, sequences show the immense scale of engineering works that took place under the Empire. The footage shows huge numbers of Indian labourers working on railways, bridges and dams, some of which were completed in remarkably short spaces of time. In one case, an entire collapsed bridge was rebuilt in between two scheduled services.

Much is revealed about the under-studied lives of women, both British and Indian. "By looking at the way in which British women presented themselves to the camera in these films, we start deciphering things about their experiences," Dr. Motrescu said. "It rapidly becomes clear that often they weren't necessarily enjoying spectacular lives of leisure and wealth. In very short scenes they show us signs of anxiety and

boredom."

The Centre of South Asian Studies is now seeking funding to link its film collection and its oral history archive, which contains more than 300 recorded interviews and was released online last year. It is hoped that the two will, in time, be available as a single package that can be used in schools, universities, and by anyone with an interest in film or Imperial history.

More information: -- www.youtube.com/cambridgeuniversity

Provided by University of Cambridge

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