'A RATHER TEDIOUS AND UNFORTUNATE AFFAIR': THE *RAHI* SAGA AND THE TROUBLED ORIGINS OF INDO-SOVIET CINEMATIC EXCHANGE

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Abstract

This article breaks new ground by reframing the context in which the governments of India and the Soviet Union arrived at an understanding that determined the course of cinematic exchange between the two countries during the Cold War. It suggests that official Indian attitudes to the export of commercial films to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics were not formulated on the basis of carefully calibrated political considerations, but rather on an ad hoc footing, and in response to a combination of unwelcome Soviet pressure and commercial concerns voiced by Indian filmmakers. To fully understand the origins of Indian cinema's emergence as an prominent feature of cultural life behind the Iron Curtain it is necessary to travel back to the early 1950s, when an unlikely alliance was forged between K. A. Abbas, a flamboyant and politically well-connected Indian filmmaker, and N. P. Koulebiakin, a dour communist apparatchik in charge of the Indian arm of Sovexportfilm, the Soviet agency responsible for the import and export of feature films. Specifically, this article recovers the hitherto elided role played by Indian filmmakers, such as Abbas, and lesser known Indian films, such as *Rahi*, in establishing the political ground rules that governed bi-lateral Indo-Soviet cinematic interchange.

On 26 June 1954, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, an influential Indian film producer, director and screenwriter, dispatched a stinging letter to C. B. Rao, deputy secretary of India's

ministry of Information and Broadcasting (I&B). Writing from Mumbai, where his production company, *Naya Sansar* (New World), had developed cinematic blockbusters such as *Awara* (Tramp), Abbas lamented efforts to export his latest film, *Rahi* (Wayfarer*)*, to the Soviet Union, had turned into 'a 'rather tedious and unfortunate affair.' [1] The crux of Abbas' disaffection centred on the Indian government's interaction with N. P. Koulebiakin, a Soviet citizen who had arrived in the subcontinent the previous year. An Indologist and professor of Sanskrit, Koulebiakin had come to South Asia to manage the Indian branch of Sovexportfilm, the official Soviet agency dealing with the import and export of feature films. During the proceeding eighteen months, Koulebiakin's efforts to enlist the support of the Government of India in procuring Indian films for Soviet audiences had met with a series of setbacks, frustrations and misunderstandings.

To Abbas' alarm, protracted negotiations between Indian government officials and Koulebiakin over the export of *Rahi* had taken an increasingly acrimonious turn that threatened both wider Indo-Soviet relations, and the film producer's access to lucrative export revenues. The Indian filmmaker reflected ruefully that since entering into discussions with Koulebiakin in an effort to bring his work to cinemagoers inside the communist bloc, 'much water has flown down the Volga as well as the Jumna, but my dilemma and puzzlement remain very much the same.' 'So far as I can see,' Abbas complained bitterly to the ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 'the Soviet Government is not going to displease the Government of India for the sake of a single film (which happens to be my film) but I am afraid the whole affair is going to leave a bad taste in their mouth, and their whole scheme of buying Indian films may be jettisoned.' Concluding his missive to C. B. Rao with a dramatic flourish of artistic pique, the Indian film impresario cautioned that, 'Your Ministry's ban on RAHI's

sojourn to Russia will only deliver the coup de grace to the reckless idealism of producers.'[2]

The genesis of Indian cinematic exchange with the Soviet Union during the Cold War period has received scant scholarly attention. Accounts of the history of India cinema have been framed overwhelmingly in a narrow domestic context, privileging Indian filmmaking's social and cultural impact inside the subcontinent. Broader studies of the transnational dimension of popular Indian film have invariably been interpreted through the prism of diasporic South Asian communities located in Europe and the United States. Works such as Eric Barnouw's and S. Krishnaswamy's, *Indian Film* (1980), engage with the evolution of Indian cinema as form of cultural production and as an arbiter of shifting social norms, but largely ignore its wider international significance. Similarly, Sumita Chakravarty's valuable intervention, *National Ideology in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947-1987* (1983), approaches post-1947 Indian cinematography primarily as means of assessing the construction of post-colonial Indian national identities. Likewise, Dinesh Raheja's and Jitendra Kothari's, *Indian Cinema: The Bollywood Saga* (2004), while providing a comprehensive narrative of the growth of Indian film during the twentieth-century, marginalizes its global influence outside the Western Hemisphere. Prominent surveys, such as *Bollywood: The Indian Cinema Story* (2001), by Nasreen Munir Kabir, offer little insight into the geo-politics of Indian cinema. K. A. Abbas' own, *I am Not an Island: An Experiment in Autobiography* (1977), is full of illuminating, if self-congratulatory vignettes, that laud the author's role in bringing Indian cinema to the Soviet Union, but omits any discussion of the Cold War politics underpinning early Indo-Soviet cultural diplomacy.[3]

A notable exception to the dearth of critical analysis informing current

understanding of Indo-Soviet cinematic interchange is Sudha Rajagoplan's recent publication, *Indian Films in Soviet Cinemas: The Culture of Movie-Going After Stalin* (2008). [4] Rajagopalan provides a sweeping examination of Soviet cultural consumption of India cinema, from the so-called 'golden age' of Hindi films in the 1950s, through to the implosion of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in the early 1990s. Yet, Rajagopalan's book overlooks the critical role played by filmmakers, such as Abbas, and less celebrated films, such as *Rahi*, in establishing the political ground rules that governed bi-lateral Indo-Soviet cinematic transactions. Moreover, Rajagoplan's attention is directed predominantly upon the reception of Indian movies in the Soviet Union, and has little to say on the Cold War politics that determined the Indian government's relationships with Bollywood filmmakers attracted by commercial opportunities behind the iron Curtain. Important work has been conducted, therefore, into the broad history of Indian cinema's relationship with the Soviet Union. However, the political mechanisms established to facilitate early cinematic collaboration between India and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and, more pertinently, the currency that these retained throughout the remainder of the Cold War, remains a historiographical lacuna in need of attention.

This article breaks new ground by reframing the context in which the governments of India and the Soviet Union arrived at an understanding that determined the course of cinematic exchange between the two countries during the Cold War. It suggests that official Indian attitudes to the export of commercial films to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics were not formulated on the basis of carefully calibrated political considerations, but rather on an ad hoc footing, and in response to a combination of unwelcome Soviet pressure and commercial concerns voiced by Indian filmmakers. To fully understand the origins of Indian cinema's emergence as an prominent feature

of cultural life in the Soviet Union, it is necessary to travel back to the early 1950s and interrogate an unlikely alliance forged between K. A. Abbas, a flamboyant and politically connected Indian filmmaker, and N. P. Koulebiakin, the dour communist apparatchik in charge of the Indian arm of Sovexportfilm.

In July 1953, shortly after arriving in Mumbai from Moscow to take charge of Sovexportfilm's Indian office, Koulebiakin earmarked Abbas' film, *Rahi*, as suitable for public exhibition in the Soviet Union. Based on Mulk Raj Anand's novel, *Two Leaves and a Bud*, *Rahi* tells the story of Ramesh, a character played by the Bollywood star, Dev Anand. An overseer employed by tyrannical British colonial planters, Ramesh supervises fellow workers on a tea plantation in the northeastern Indian state of Assam.[5] The film's storyline traces Ramesh's transformation from a brutal and whip wielding lackey of British imperialists, into the heroic leader of a workers revolt against cruel and exploitative overlords. Four years previously, in 1949, Sovexportfilm had purchased its first Indian film, *Dharti Ke Lal* (Children of the Earth). In 1951, a second Indian movie, *Chinnamul* (The Uprooted) was screened in Soviet cinemas. Neither film proved especially popular with Soviet cinemagoers. In turning to *Rahi*, Koulebiakin hoped that its more colourful and dramatic plot would buck this regrettable trend and capture the imagination of his fellow countrymen.[6]

In August, India's film censors passed the original cut of *Rahi*, which had been produced in Hindi for a domestic audience, without any cuts. An English language version of the film was subsequently examined by a special film committee, convened by the chairman of India's central board of censors, Clifford Aggarwala, 'who wanted to make sure about the film's suitability for being sent abroad.' After reviewing the film for a second time, the censors duly passed *Rahi* as suitable for export from India. Aggarwala went on to include *Rahi* in a list of films recommended to Koulebiakin by

the Indian board of censors as appropriate for audiences in Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.[7] Anxious to secure the Indian government's blessing for Sovexportfilm's purchase of *Rahi*, along with ten other Indian films, including *Awara*, Koulebiakin sought formal approval for the commercial transaction from India's ministries of External Affairs (MEA), Information and Broadcasting, and Commerce.

To Koulebiakin's consternation, a succession of letters dispatched from Sovexportfilm to Indian government officials went unanswered. In an effort to cut through Indian bureaucratic red tape, a perplexed Koulebiakin turned to Abbas for assistance. The Indian film producer proved only too willing to help. In August 1947, following the end of British colonial rule in South Asia and the traumatic partition of the subcontinent into the sovereign states of India and Pakistan, India's thriving cinematic industry was bifurcated. Caught up in the atmosphere of rancour, animosity and conflict that blighted Indo-Pakistani relations after 1947, films produced in India were boycotted in Pakistan. Denied access to familiar and profitable markets, Indian producers, such as Abbas, had begun to look beyond the subcontinent in search of new outlets for their movies. The Soviet Union, with an enormous network of state-run cinemas, appealed to many Indian filmmakers as one solution to an unwelcome and pressing commercial and problem.

In September 1953, at Koulebiakin's request, Abbas undertook a 'pilgrimage' from Mumbai to India's capital, New Delhi, to lobby Indian ministers on behalf of Sovexportfilm. Associated with a prominent circle of radical social writers in British India, Abbas had helped to launch the Indian People's Theatre Association, which staged political plays throughout the 1940s. Born into a prosperous family with strong connections to the Indian nationalist movement, Abbas benefited from an education in English and Law at the prestigious Aligarh Muslim University. Following a stint in

journalism, where he cemented connections with prominent Indian politicians, Abbas had gravitated towards a career in scriptwriting and film production. On his arrival in New Delhi, Abbas raised Koulebiakin's case in a series meetings held with C. B. Rao, B. V. Keskar, India's Information Minister, and the nation's prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. To his satisfaction, Abbas received assurances from government officials that no obstacles existed, in principle, to Indian films being exported to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Legally, the Indian producer was informed, any film certified by India's central board of censors could be sent abroad for screening. Since *Rahi* had successfully passed the board of censors, Abbas returned to Mumbai content that all was well and, 'that seemed to be the "happy end" of the matter.'[8]

In Early November, following up on the breakthrough that Abbas' intervention appeared to have secured, Koulebiakin travelled to Delhi and handed government officials the list of eleven Indian films that Sovexportfilm had selected for exhibition in the Soviet Union. During a round of meetings with Rao, S. Bhoothalingam of the ministry of Commerce & Industry, R. T Chary of the MEA, and K. Subrahmanian, vice-chairman of the Film Federation of India, Koulebiakin discussed plans to stage an Indian film festival in Moscow, and expand the commercial distribution of Indian films in the USSR. Strictly speaking, as Abbas had discovered, Sovexportfilm did not require the Indian government's permission to purchase export licences for Indian films. Nevertheless, in an effort to avoid unduly antagonising his hosts, Koulebiakin deemed it wise to procure some form of official endorsement. On 27 November, having returned to Mumbai, the Soviet official fired off a letter to the Information and Broadcasting ministry. This confirmed that having purchased distribution rights to eleven Indian films, Sovexportfilm had sent sample prints back to the USSR in preparation for the proposed festival of Indian films in the Soviet capital.

As Koulebiakin later noted, his letter of 27 November was motivated primarily by a desire to uphold diplomatic courtesy, and not by any sense of statuary obligation. 'Since we had already received your [the government of India's] permission to export any Indian film,' Koulebiakin informed the I&B ministry, 'We wanted to inform you of our move of despatching of the films only because it is a custom among friendly countries to do so.'[9] A month later, on 22 December, D. Krishna Ayyar, deputy secretary at the ministry of Information and Broadcasting, informed Koulebiakin that the Indian government had no objection to the export of ten of the films purchased by Sovexportfilm. An opinion on the eleventh film, *Rahi*, Ayyar confirmed, would follow in due course.[10]

Koulebiakin heard nothing more from the Indian government until the following April, when a letter arrived at Sovexportfilm's office on Mumbai's Cuffe Parade from the ministry of Information and Broadcasting. To Koulebiakin's dismay, the perfunctory letter stated that the ministry considered *Rahi* to be unsuitable for exhibition in the Soviet Union. In the period between December 1953 and April 1954, Abbas had signed a contract with Sovexportfilm for the export *Rahi*, the original Hindi print of which had been despatched to a Moscow film studio to be redubbed into Russian. Moreover, Abbas had advised Indian journalists that Sovexportfilm had acquired the rights to *Rahi* and would shortly be the releasing picture in cinemas across the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. In March, the leading Indian national newspaper, the *Hindustan Times*, proclaimed loudly that '*Rahi* Goes to Russia,' and advised its substantial readership that, having viewed Abbas' film in Moscow, the Great Arts Council of the USSR had selected *Rahi* for the honour of general distribution in the Soviet Union.[11]

Reluctant at this late stage in proceedings to unwind the commercial and logistical arrangements that Sovexportfilm had put in place to prepare *Rahi* for its release in the Soviet Union, Koulebiakin rushed off an urgent letter to Ayyar. Koulebiakin offered to recut *Rahi* at the direction of the ministry of Information and Broadcasting, excising any content that the Indian government deemed unsuitable for foreign audiences. Two months passed before Koulebiakin's note received an answer. On 21 June, to Koulebiakin's distress, he received terse missive from Ayyar that ignored Sovexportfilm's proposal to recut *Rahi*, and merely reiterated the Indian government's objection to the films distribution in the USSR.[12]

Elsewhere in Mumbai, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas fulminated at the Indian governments decision to categorize his film as inappropriate for export. Mystified that the ministry of Information and Broadcasting should have singled out *Rahi* for censure after it had been passed by the central board of censors, a perplexed Abbas bemoaned that he had, 'not the remotest idea what objection the Ministry can have to RAHI being shown in the USSR.' In fact, the Indian film producer suspected that two different facets of *Rahi* had adversely influenced the Indian government's attitude toward the film. The first, and less consequential issue, revolved around the *Rahi's* less than sympathetic portrayal of its British protagonists. Although Abbas vehemently denied that his film was in any way 'anti-British', he correctly deduced that New Delhi was uneasy at the diplomatic furore that could ensue were the Soviet authorities to play up the exploitative character of British colonialism portrayed in *Rahi*. The second, and more substantive obstacle, lay in the powerful and evocative images that *Rahi* conjured up of a feudal, backward and underdeveloped India. At a time when the Nehru government was in midst of independent India's first Five-Year Plan, which had been widely touted as a model blueprint for post-colonial modernization and development,

Indian bureaucrats took a dim view of anything that cut across the grain of a progressive national narrative. Anticipating just such a problem, before passing *Rahi*, the central board of censors had advised Abbas that the title sequence to his film should make it abundantly clear to audiences that the story was set in pre-independence India, under British colonial governance.

To Abbas, the Indian government's position in relation to *Rahi* appeared not only irrational, but also culturally suspect. Punishing filmmakers for daring to make movies with a strong social message would, Abbas bemoaned, 'only penalize and perhaps pauperize a poor producer like me who has already suffered terrible losses for daring to make films that do not correspond to the prevailing craze for cheap song-dance stuff.' Nevertheless, prioritizing commercial considerations over artistic integrity, Abbas elected to follow Koulebiakin's lead, and seek out a pragmatic accommodation with the Indian government. Offering to cut any segment of his film that the Information and Broadcasting ministry deemed 'objectionable', Abbas emphasized his willingness to fly to New Delhi and personally, 'complete shot-by-shot [the] script and you [the Ministry of information and Broadcasting] can mark out the portions that you want deleted.'[13]

Meanwhile, stung by the Indian government's peremptory dismissal of the olive branch that he had extended of behalf of Sovexportfilm, an exercised Koulebiakin changed tack and went on to the offensive. On 30 June, in a letter sent to the ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Koulebiakin bluntly stated that he 'could not help being surprised to see the lack of good will' evidenced by the Indian government toward Sovexportfilm, which, he added pointedly, 'cannot but produce undesirable [an] impression on our Principals in Moscow.' The Soviet Union had, Koulebiakin underlined, believed that Sovexportfilm's mandate to promote cinematic exchange

between India and the USSR was, 'in accord with Indian commercial, cultural and political interests.' Instead, the aloof and unresponsive manner in which Indian government officials had conducted relations with Sovexportfilm led Koulebiakin to surmise that:

> All matters with regard to the film "RAHI" look like artificial hindrance in the way of development of regular distribution of Indian films in the biggest film market of the world, that is in the U.S.S.R., and we cannot believe that such artificial and undesirable hindrance is in accord with the interests of India and Indian film industry.[14]

Having put forward a 'very reasonable solution' to the *Rahi* impasse, and one that from Koulebiakin's perspective both took into account the Indian government's interests and avoided undue damage to Sovexportfilm's prestige and financial position, the Soviet official expressed bewilderment at the 'cold reception' that it had garnered in New Delhi. In Koulebiakin's view, the Indian government was guilty of making an unnecessary and, 'too late move against "RAHI."' As such, the ministry of Information and Broadcasting was implored by the head of Sovexportfilm to think again, and 'show your good will in this undesirably complicated question which will encourage us greatly to continue selection and distribution of Indian films in the U.S.S.R.'[15]

The strained relationship between Sovexportfilm and India's ministry of Information of Broadcasting played out against the wider background of an expanding Soviet cultural and political offensive in India. Following India's independence, New Delhi's relationship with the Soviet Union had been inhibited by Joseph Stalin's conviction that nascent post-colonial states were little more than imperialist puppets. One Indian official recorded that the state-controlled Soviet press seemed determined to portray India as, 'a stronghold of reaction, a persecutor of democratic forces, a hanger-on of

the Anglo-American bloc, and the harbinger of a new Imperialism in the East.'[16] In June 1948, writing to his sister and India's Ambassador to Moscow, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Jawaharlal Nehru expressed deep concern about the official Russian attitude towards India. 'Our attempts to increase friendly intercourse between India and the USSR have not met with any response in Russia,' Nehru observed despondently. 'The Soviet Government treats us with scant courtesy and even ignores us. Articles in their newspapers attack our Government,' India's leader complained. 'I do not see why we should take these [Soviet] attacks lying down. Personally it seems to me exceedingly foolish of the Russian Government to follow this policy because this business of being tough does not win over any country's sympathy for them.'[17]

To the relief of Nehru's government, signals had emerged from Moscow toward the end of the Stalin era of a softening in the Soviet approach to India. Having previously shunned social contact with Indian officials, during the course of 1953 the Soviet leadership began fraternizing with Indian diplomats. Andrey Vishinsky, foreign minister of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, started to attend receptions at the Indian Embassy in Moscow for the first time. In New Delhi, the Soviet ambassador displayed a new and 'sudden affability' towards his Indian hosts. At the same time, much of the 'tendentious propaganda' that the Soviet Union had directed at India ceased.[18] More substantively, the Soviets began to take India's side in its territorial dispute with Pakistan over the contested state of Kashmir. Aside from the strategic advantage that the Indian government identified in maintaining friendly relations with both the eastern and western Cold War blocs, many Indians, Nehru included, failed to share the visceral antipathy for communism prevalent in the United States and much of Western Europe. As an avowed socialist, the Indian premier acknowledged and admired Soviet accomplishments in fields as diverse as economic planning, education

and healthcare. Moreover, as one Indian official noted, Soviet calls for 'the end of colonialism and racial discrimination and for redistribution of world wealth, are by no means disagreeable to India.'[19]

In the cultural sphere, in the early 1950s concerned western diplomats in India began to record signs of, 'increased attention being paid by the Soviet authorities to the improvement and widening of Indo-Soviet relations.' In part, the Russian charm offensive in India was attributed to the arrival in New Delhi, in 1953, of a new Soviet ambassador, Mikhail Menshikov. The 'social qualities' exhibited by Menshikov, one British diplomat observed, appeared better suited to the promotion of Indo-Soviet ties than those of his dour predecessor, Kirill Novikov. This was not to say that Novikov had been entirely inactive in the cultural field. Early in 1951, the Soviet cine art festival, whose committee members included both the chief justice of Mumbai's high court, and Jawaharlal Nehru's youngest sister, Krishna Nehru Hutheesing, screened a programme of Soviet films in Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata.[20] In May that year, Archibald Nye, Britain's high commissioner in India, cautioned Whitehall that a Soviet 'cultural offensive' in the India had seen, 'an increase of activity by the Soviet Embassy in Delhi in the propaganda field and also in their contacts with Indians.'[21] Nye's colleagues in the American embassy in New Delhi shared his anxiety. In June, American diplomats in the Indian capital informed Washington that, 'It is quite apparent that the Communists are making a bid at the moment in the field of cultural infiltration; i.e., Soviet film festivals, GBS societies, influencing of IPTA theatre groups, work with art societies, and of course numerous journalistic sorties.'[22]

Nonetheless, on his arrival in South Asia, Menshikov wasted little time in pushing for an increase in cultural exchange between India and the Soviet Union. On the new Ambassador's watch, a branch of the Indo-Soviet cultural society was inaugurated in

New Delhi. Menshikov also arranged the staging of an Indian art exhibition in Russia, and for the celebrated Indian dancer, Indrani Rahman, to embark on a tour of the eastern bloc. In addition, Menshikov orchestrated the visit of a large Soviet cultural delegation to India. Headed by the Soviet deputy minister of culture, Nikolai H. Despalov, the delegation toured India between January and March 1954. The Soviet party, which included amongst its ranks acrobats, singers, instrumentalists, dancers and comedians, was compared by the British to a much bigger and more ambitious version of, 'the kind of touring company that ENSA used to assemble during the war.' In the Indian capital, the Soviet artistes entertained a crowd of 12,000 at a special open-air concert staged at the national stadium.[23] Taken aback by the energy with which the Soviet ambassador had embraced the merits of cultural diplomacy, the British high commission in India grumbled to London that, 'Mr. Menshikov has continued in his public statements to expound in a way that is now getting decidedly monotonous his two themes – trade and culture.'[24]

It was not only the British, however, that evidenced reservations about the scale and purpose of the Soviet cultural offensive in India. Within the Indian press, Menshikov's initiatives to promote Indo-Soviet amity began to come under 'careful scrutiny.' In April 1954, the *Hindustan Times* queried the 'so-called good-will missions' in which Indian delegations invited to the Soviet Union, 'superficially compare the conditions in Russia with those in their own country.' Such 'missions', the *Hindustan Times* noted, 'never examine the background… of the regimented labour, the regimented Press and public opinion' inside the Communist bloc.[25] In conversation with British diplomats, while conceding his apprehension at the upsurge in Soviet cultural propaganda directed at India, the country's home secretary, H.V.R. Iengar, quipped that it was fortunate most Indian film stars and artistes sent on

exchange trips to the USSR were, 'incapable of understanding Communism.'[26]

Iengar's colleagues in India's ministry of external affairs took a less relaxed approach to the issue of Soviet cultural diplomacy. For five years, between 1946 and 1951, the Nehru government had been forced to battle an indigenous communist insurgency centered on the Telegana region of southern India. Consequently, New Delhi took a firm line in its dealings with the Communist Party of India, arresting communist activists suspected of inciting civil disorder or engaging in political subversion. On the campaign trail during India's first general election, which took place between October 1951 and February 1952, Nehru urged a crowd of Indian communists waving red banners etched with the Soviet hammer and sickle motif to 'go and live in the country whose flag you are carrying'.[27]

Inside the MEA, misgivings mounted in the early 1950s over 'evidence and reports' that documented a, 'considerable increase in the extent of systematic communist propaganda in India.' In April 1952, writing to Vijaya Laskshmi Pandit in the Indian Embassy in Moscow, MEA officials complained that a 'large number of [Soviet] propaganda films are imported [into India] every month.' More pertinently, the MEA protested that:

> Several Indian films which convey a most degrading and undesirable impression of the country and its people have been imported into the Communist countries and adapted for local use and are being widely shown in communist countries. For example, "Uprooted" by Newail Ghosh, "Children of the Earth", by Peoples Theatre and "Neecha Nigar", agave a one-sided picture of Indian life, and yet the public in the U.S.S.R. and other places are being given this distorted view of India.[28]

Attempts to impose some form of control the export of Indian films to communist countries through the central film censor board had, the MEA observed, met with protests from local embassies. While the Indian government had done its best to

accommodate requests from the eastern bloc for the export of films, the MEA noted that, 'as far as Indian films are concerned only the undesirable ones are selected for exhibition to their [the Soviets] own people.' This was all the more troubling to the MEA since Indian embassies in communist countries had no facilities to project an alternative image of India by, for example, arranging public screenings of films that portrayed a more positive and progressive impression of life in the subcontinent.[29]

Against this background, Koulebiakin's drive to export Indian films to the Soviet Union served as the catalyst for debate inside the Indian government, with *Rahi* at its epicentre, over how to respond to pressure emanating from Sovexportfilm to expand Indo-Soviet cinematic exchange. The deputy secretary of the MEA, R. T. Chari, advocated bypassing Koulebiakin and his agency, and taking Indian concerns over film exports directly to more senior officials in the Soviet government. In the pressing case of *Rahi*, however, Chari suggested adopting a pragmatic line. Not having seen the film, Chari noted the reservations expressed by the central board of censors and his colleagues within the Information and Broadcasting ministry in relation to its content. These encompassed the two sensitive political questions that had previously occupied Abbas. The first, surrounding 'the susceptibilities of Englishmen since the story depicts the harsh treatment by English tea planters in Assam of Indian labourers,' was not regarded as especially problematic by the MEA. The second issue remained one of adequate contextualisation. Although set in 1945, two years prior to India's independence, Chari conceded that, 'it would be unfortunate if audiences in the Soviet Union got the idea that these labour conditions [portrayed in *Rahi*] obtain even today in Assam.'[30]

Reluctant to insist on cuts to the film, which Chari suspected would risk compromising its artistic integrity, the MEA official favoured approving the film's

export to the USSR on the proviso that, 'it was preceded by a statement that the film was made in 1945 and does not represent the actual position in India today.' Chari's colleagues at the ministry of Information and Broadcasting disagreed. Mr. Lad, the secretary of I&B, took exception to Chari's proposal to sanction *Rahi's* export under certain conditions, and continued to insist that 'the film should not be shown abroad.' Were Sovexportfilm to press ahead and exhibit *Rahi* in the USSR, Lad insisted, it should be made clear to Moscow that this had been done 'against the advice of the Government of India.'[31]

At this point in proceedings, an exasperated K. A. Abbas travelled once more from Mumbai to New Delhi, undertaking a second, and, on this occasion, decisive intervention in the *Rahi* story. Leveraging his personal connections within the upper echelons of Indian politics, on 10 July 1954, Abbas secured an interview with Jawaharlal Nehru. During his meeting with the Indian premier, Abbas took the opportunity to extoll the artistic merits of his film at some considerable length. At the same time, the Indian producer offered Nehru a less than flattering account of what he represented as a petty and internecine conflict over *Rahi*, that had broken out between squabbling bureaucrats in the MEA and I&B. By the end of his encounter with Nehru, Abbas had succeeded in obtaining the Indian premier's blessing for *Rahi* to be exported to the Soviet Union. In a memorandum despatched to his ministers, Nehru confessed that, 'I know nothing about this particular film [*Rahi*], but I have heard that it is considered as one of our best films of the year and might even get an award.' 'If it is a good film and it is made clear that it deals with our pre-Independence period,' the Indian leader pronounced definitively, 'there might perhaps, be no objection to its being sent to the USSR.'[32]

Nehru's intercession prompted a smug MEA to call upon the Information and Broadcasting ministry to 'reconsider' its position on *Rahi*.[33] In response, B. V. Keskar, India's minister for Information and Broadcasting, elected to beat a tactical retreat in relation to Abbas' film, in the hope of securing a strategic victory on the broader question of film export controls. Keskar denied somewhat implausibly that there had ever been any question of his ministry discouraging Sovexportfilm from distributing films in the USSR that had been certified by the central board of censors, *Rahi* included. Rather, the minister claimed, his departments concern with the operations of Sovexportfilm had centred on matters of appropriate procedure. Above all, Keskar pointed to Koulebiakin's presumption that, having selected a list of Indian films for export without first consulting officials at the I&B ministry, it would be a mere formality to obtain the Indian government's post-facto approval. Such an approach was all the more problematic, he asserted, when, 'in making the selection preference has been given [by Sovexportfilm] to films which show class conflict or economic trouble or revolt against colonialism…[and] is therefore tendentious and would not convey an adequate idea of Indian films.' In the absence of adequate film export controls, Keskar argued, Indian movies risked, 'being put to unscrupulous use in Russia.' 'It would not be desirable for foreigners to make a selection of Indian propaganda material from their point of view,' the minister added, 'and then expect the Government of India to accept that selection and officially approve it.' In short, the ministry of Information and Broadcasting insisted that, 'What must be made clear is that, if any film is to be shown abroad with the approval of the Government of India, the initial selection must be made by the Government of India.'[34]

On the specific matter of *Rahi*, D. Krishna Ayyar was deputed to instruct Koulebiakin that there was now, 'no question of this Ministry [I&B] interfering with

any business arrangements which you may have made in this [*Rahi's*] behalf and I am to reiterate to you that you are at liberty to follow those business arrangements in any way you like.'[35] Having finally given Sovexportfilm the green light to export *Rahi* to the Soviet Union, the Indian government made contact with the Soviet embassy in New Delhi. On 1 August, in a letter sent to Guerman I. Ashurov, the Soviet embassy's counsellor, Chari underlined Indian reservations over *Rahi's* suitability for export, and helpfully suggested how these might best be mitigated. 'To avoid the wrong impression that the scenes portrayed in this film in any way represent conditions prevailing in Assam tea plantations today,' Ashurov was prodded to ensure that, 'a suitable statement [is] projected on the screen in [Soviet cinemas] introducing the film.'[36]

Having been dragged belatedly into the *Rahi* saga, Soviet diplomats in India immediately instructed Sovexportfilm to set about ameliorating the animosity that its actions had generated within Nehru's government. On 5 September, in a grovelling letter sent to the ministry of Information and Broadcasting, the previously spikey and combative Koulebiakin expressed 'sincere regret' that, 'measures taken by me in order to avoid any complications or misunderstanding [produced] quite [the] contrary impression.' No doubt with his eye on the Indian film festival scheduled to take place in Moscow later that month, Koulebiakin begged forgiveness from the I&B ministry for his, 'unexperience [sic] in local procedure as far as selection of films is concern[ed].' Moving forward, the Soviet official pledged to work closely with the Indian government to facilitate the, 'regular exchange of good films between India and USSR.'[37]

On 23 September 1954, the Soviet minister of culture, Georgy Aleksandrov, formally opened the 'Film Festival of the Republic of India' in Moscow. *Rahi*

featured prominently amongst the exhibits. In his inauguration speech, Aleksandrov acclaimed the first Indian film festival to take place in the USSR as indicative of a 'new step' in Indo-Soviet relations. 'Expanding the exchange of films must play an important role in the growth and strengthening of cultural ties between our countries,' the Soviet minister enthused. Listening appreciatively in the audience were K. A. Abbas, Dev Anand, Raj Kapoor, and a host of India's most eminent film stars.[38] Feted by his Soviet hosts, Abbas and his entourage were paraded before the Soviet public at special screenings held in Moscow's Udarnik and Forum film theatres; were guided around the Kremlin, Palace of Culture, and Lenin mausoleum; and met with leading members of VOKS, the Soviet Society for Cultural Relations. The Indian visitors found their faces splashed across the front pages of Soviet newspapers.[39] Some 800 copies of *Rahi* were subsequently distributed inside the Soviet Union, where the film drew critical plaudits and played to packed houses. Reviewing *Rahi* in *Sovetskaya Kirghizia*, one Soviet film critic praised the film as a new milestone in 'progressive' cinematography. 'Whereas in the previous Indian films we have seen social problems presented as an undercurrent, between the lines, as it were,' Soviet citizens were informed, 'here [in *Rahi*] they ring out with full power.'[40]

The appeal of Indian films behind the Iron Curtain was brought home to Indian government officials the following year, when Jawaharlal Nehru paid a state visit to the Soviet Union. Nehru's delegation included both *Rahi's* leading man, Dev Anand, and Raj Kapoor, star of the hit film, *Awara*. As the official Indian party travelled across the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, its members were struck by an apparently genuine public affinity for Indian cinema. One Indian diplomat recorded that:

> We saw a number of Indian pictures being shown (I was told to packed houses) not only in Central Asia, but as far north as Magnitogorsk. At one town...I entered my room in the villa placed at our disposal, I heard a catchy tune with a lilt being played on the gramophone. Experience at another town had taught me that the piece came from the film "Awara".[41]

Soviet authorities carefully stage-managed the Indian delegation's programme. Yet, the fact that *Awara* is estimated to have attracted cinema audiences in the Soviet Union of some sixty million, suggests that Indian cinema did resonate particularly deeply with the country's citizens.[42] In part, this can be attributed to the socialist sentiments running through many Indian films, *Rahi* included. Equally, the vibrancy, colour, exuberance, and infuriatingly catchy songs that came to typify Indian cinematic output, offered a striking counterpoint to the duller and more mundane everyday realities of life inside the eastern bloc.

Significantly, the modus operandi that Sovexportfilm established with the Indian government as a consequence of the *Rahi* affair, served as a model for Indo-Soviet cinematic exchange throughout the remainder of the Cold War. Periodic disputes continued to surface between different ministries inside the Indian government over the suitability of particular films for export to the Soviet Union.[43] On occasions, Koulebiakin and his successors clashed with the ministry of Information and Broadcasting over the quantity, quality, and content of Indian films released to Soviet audiences. In March 1955, Koulebiakin was to be found bemoaning the absence of films from Bengal and south India on approved lists that the I&B ministry had, in collaboration with the Film Association of India, begun to issue to Sovexportfilm. 'Naturally you cannot expect that all of the films so far recommended by you will be liked by us,' Koulebiakin grumbled in a letter to the under secretary of I&B. 'We cannot understand why we should be deprived of the possibility to buy more films from India.'[44]

Generally, however, whilst chaffing at the constraints that its informal understanding with the Indian government imposed on Sovexportfilm's freedom of action in the Indian film market, Moscow proved willing to operate within a set of political and cultural parameters imposed by New Delhi. Likewise, while keeping Indian film exports on a tight leash, the Indian government and, more specifically, the ministry of Information and Broadcasting, evidenced a more accommodating line with Sovexportfilm in the aftermath of the *Rahi* affair. In the cinematic realm, at least, whenever wider political considerations permitted, the Indian government invariably did what it could to keep the Soviets happy. [45]

Contemporary events have underlined the extent to which cinematic exchange came to represent a significant and enduring element of Indo-Soviet cultural politics during, and beyond, the Cold War. As late as 1984, the Indian film, *Disco Dancer*, a South Asian version of *Saturday Night Fever*, with the Bollywood star Mithun Chakraborty reprising the role that catapulted John Travolta to global fame, was pulling in huge audiences in Soviet cinemas.[46] On his visit to India, in December 2010, the itinerary of Russian president, Dmitry Medvedev, included a tour of Mumba's Yash Raj film studios. 'Our country is one of the places where Indian culture is most admired,' Medvedev pronounced during a joint news conference with India's prime minister, Manmohan Singh. 'Russia and India are the only countries where satellite channels broadcast Indian movies 24/7.' Much as it had in the past, however, Medvedev's foray into Indian cinema was driven principally by political and economic self-interest. At the time, Moscow and New Delhi were considering a project to remake popular Indian films from the 1950s with joint casts of Indian and Russians actors. The two governments were also in the midst of negotiations involving the exchange

of fighter aircraft and nuclear technology. In the context of Indo-Russian relations, it seems, cinema's attraction as an instrument of cultural diplomacy remains undimmed.

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[1] K. A. Abbas to C. B. Rao, 26 June 1954, P. N. Haksar Papers, III Instalment, Subject File 42, Nehru Museum and Memorial Library, New Delhi (hereafter PNHP, NMML). Directed by and starring, Raj Kapoor, *Awara*, was nominated for the Grand Prize at the 1953 Cannes Film Festival. The films subsequent critical and commercial success, on both sides of the Iron Curtain, led *Time* magazine to rank it amongst the top twenty films in its list of *Time's* All-Time 100 Movies.
[2] K. A. Abbas to C. B. Rao, 26 June 1954, III Instalment, Subject File 42, PNHP, NMML.
[3] See, Eric Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film* (New York, 1980); Sumita Chakravarty, *National Ideology in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947-1987* (Austin, 1983); Dinesh Raheja and Jitendra Kothari, *Indian Cinema: The Bollywood Saga* (London, 2004); Nasreen Munir Kabir, *Bollywood: The Indian Cinema Story* (London, 2001); and, K. A. Abbas, *I am Not an Island: An Experiment in Autobiography* (New Delhi, 1977).
[4] Sudha Rajagopalan, *Indian Films in Soviet Cinemas: The Culture of Movie-Going After Stalin* (Bloomington, 2008).
[5] Mulk Raj Anand, *Two Leaves and a Bud* (London, 1937).
[6] Rajagopalan, *Indian Films in Soviet Cinemas*, 12.
[7] K. A. Abbas to C. B. Rao, 26 June 1954, III Instalment, Subject File 42, PNHP, NMML; N. P. Koulebiakin to Krishnan Ayyar, 30 June 1954, ref. 263/6/54, III Instalment, Subject File 42, PNHP, NMML.
[8] K. A. Abbas to C. B. Rao, 26 June 1954, III Instalment, Subject File 42, PNHP, NMML.
[9] N. P. Koulebiakin to Krishnan Ayyar, 30 June 1954, ref. 263/6/54, III Instalment, Subject File 42, PNHP, NMML.
[10] K. A. Abbas to C. B. Rao, 26 June 1954, III Instalment, Subject File 42, PNHP, NMML; D. Krishna Ayyar to N. Koulebiakin, 21 June 1954, III Instalment, Subject File 42, PNHP, NMML.
[11] '"Rhai" Goes to Russia', *Hindustan Times* (New Delhi), 4 March 1954.
[12] D. Krishna Ayyar to N. Koulebiakin, 21 June 1954, III Instalment, Subject File 42, PNHP, NMML.
[13] K. A. Abbas to C. B. Rao, 26 June 1954, III Instalment, Subject File 42, PNHP, NMML.
[14] N. P. Koulebiakin to Krishnan Ayyar, 30 June 1954, ref. 263/6/54, III Instalment, Subject File 42, PNHP, NMML.
[15] N. P. Koulebiakin to Krishnan Ayyar, 30 June 1954, III Instalment, Subject File 42, PNHP, NMML.
[16] K. P. S. Menon, 'India's Foreign Policy', 1950, Speeches & Writings File No. 35, K. P. S. Menon Collection, Nehru Museum and Memorial Library, New Delhi (hereafter KPSM, NMML). The evolution of India's relations with the Soviet Union have been analysed in works such as Robert C. Horn, *Soviet-Indian Relations: Issues and Influence* (New York, 1982); Peter J. S. Duncan, *The Soviet Union and India* (London, 1989); Ramesh Thakur and Carlyle A. Thayer, *Soviet Relations with India and Vietnam, 1945–1992* (New York, 1992); and, most recently, Vojtech Mastny, The Soviet Union's Partnership with India' *Journal of Cold War Studies,* 12, (2010), 50–90.
[17] Jawaharlal Nehru to Pandit, 21 June 1948, Subject File 54, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit Papers, Nehru Museum and Memorial Library, New Delhi (hereafter VLPP, NMML).
[18] P. N. Kaul, 'The Scope for developing Trade Relations with U.S.S.R.' 1954, Ministry of External Affairs, D/3042/Europe, National Archives of India, New Delhi (hereafter MEA, NAI).
[19] K. P. S. Menon, 'India's Foreign Policy', 1950, Speeches & Writings File No. 35, KPSM, NMML.
[20] 'Notes on Communism in India, Pakistan and Ceylon no. 24 for the period January/March. 1951,' Foreign Office 371/92864, Public Record Office. London (hereafter FO, PRO).
[21] Archibald Nye to P. C. Gordon Walker, 5 May 1951, Dominions Office 133/134, Public Records Office, London (hereafter DO, PRO).

[22] G. Edward Clark to Mr. MacKnight, 25 June 1951, Office of South Asian Affairs India Affairs 1944-57, Lot file 57D373, Box 2, Folder Memo Book April-June 1951, Department of State Files, Record Group 59, National Archives, College Park, MD.
[23] D. L. Cole to H. Smedley, 23 March 1954, 371/112211/DL 10338/4, FO, PRO.
[24] D. L. Cole to H. G. M. Bass, 29 December 1953, 371/112211/DL 10338/2, FO, PRO.
[25] *Hindustan Times* (Delhi), 27 April 1954. See also, 'Off to Moscow,' *The Statesman* (Kolkata), 25 April 1954; and, High Commissioner's Office (New Delhi) to Chancery (Moscow), 1 May 1954, 371/112211/DL 10338/7, FO, PRO.
[26] J. J. S Garner, 'Note of Conversation with Mr. H. V. R. Iengar', 17 September 1951, 133/134, DO, PRO.
[27] Frank Moraes, *Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 143.
[28] S. Sen to Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, 'Notes on Communist Propaganda in India', 24 April 1952, Subject File 24, pp. 47-56, VLPP, NMML.
[29] S. Sen to Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, 'Notes on Communist Propaganda in India', 24 April 1952, Subject File 24, pp. 47-56, VLPP, NMML.
[30] R. T. Chari memorandum, 12 July 1954, III Instalment, Subject File 42, 9-10, PNHP, NMML.
[31] R. T. Chari memorandum, 12 July 1954, III Instalment, Subject File 42, 9-10, PNHP, NMML.
[32] P. N. Haksar, 'Prime Minister's Secretariat', 10 July 1954, III Instalment, Subject File 42, 8, PNHP, NMML.
[33] R. T. Chari memorandum, 12 July 1954, III Instalment, Subject File 42, 9-10, PNHP, NMML.
[34] B. V. Keskar, Minister, I & B Ministry, Memorandum, 21 July 1954, III Instalment, Subject File 42, PNHP, NMML.
[35] D. Krishna Ayya to Sovexportfilm, 22 July 1954, III Instalment, Subject File 43, PNHP, NMML.
[36] R. T. Chari to Guerman I. Ashurov, 1 August 1954, III Instalment, Subject File 42, PNHP, NMML.
[37] Koulebiakin to Mr. Lad, 5 September 1954, III Instalment, Subject File 42, PNHP, NMML.
[38] G. Alesksandrov , 'The Art of the People of India', *Pravda*, 24 September 1954.
[39] Rajagopalan, *Indian Films in Soviet Cinemas*, 15.
[40] D. Kochnyev, 'Rahi,' *Sovetskaya Kirghizia*, Frunze, 15 January 1955.
[41] N.R. Pillai, 'A Visit to the Soviet Union: Some Impressions and Reflections', 29 July 1955, Subject File 16, June-July 1955, Subimal Dutt Papers, NMML.
[42] In 1954, *Awara* was classified as the year's top grossing film in the Soviet Union, with an estimated audience of 63.7 million. See, Rajagopalan, *Indian Films in Soviet Cinemas*, 182.
[43] S. Gopalan (I & B Ministry) to Secretary, 28 December 1955, III Instalment, Subject File 42, PNHP, NMML.
[44] N. P. Koulebiakin to D.R. Khanna (Under Secretary, I&B), 23 March 1955, III Instalment, Subject File 42, PNHP, NMML. Having established its first Indian office in Mumbai, in 1946, it was not until 1978 that Sovexportfilm added regional branches in the southern Indian city of Chennai, and the Bengali cultural metropolis of Kolkata. Rajapopalan, *Indian Films in Soviet Cinemas*, 12.
[45] B. D. Mirchandani (Chairman, Central Board of Film Censors, Mumbai) to Under Secretary I&B), 'Commercial exhibition of Indian feature films in U.S.S.R. through Messrs. Sovexportfilm,' 26 April 1955, III Instalment, Subject File 42, PNHP, NMML.
[46] Rajagopalan, *Indian Films in Soviet Cinemas*, 183.

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