

Babli Sinha's 'Entertaining the Raj', Film as a Medium for Social Change

By Viola Brown, Staff Writer

In this short interview, Dr. Sinha discusses the inspiration for her new book "Cinema, Transnationalism, and Colonial India: Entertaining the Raj", film as a medium of social change, and the development of film.

The Index: What made you want to write this book and how is it different from anything else you've written about film?

Babli Sinha: I started working on this as part of my dissertation, so some of the chapters were from the dissertation; some of the chapters were new. It really started with my stumbling upon a couple of films from the 1920's and they were films that were produced by Indian filmmakers in the 20s; I soon discovered that American films had dominated the film market in the 20s in British India and it was raising all kinds of controversy around race and empire.

The Index: What were the controversies around those films?

Babli Sinha: So, film as a medium were appealing to a mass public and this ran against some of the traditions of segregation in the contexts of the British Empire. So cities were segregated into a white and a black quarter and then at that time in the 1910s, 20s and 30s, people of European background and people of South Asian background were not consuming the same types of entertainment. Movies as a medium tried to change, that tried to challenge that, and it was really radical at the time to have people of different racial backgrounds, different class backgrounds, different genders all occupying the same space of a movie theatre and what happened was overtly political films were always banned; the fears were primarily around kind of revolution destabilizing the prestige of the British.

The Index: How do you see film as a way of social change?

Babli Sinha: So, I think that film as a medium can affect change in a number of ways; one is there are films that are socially engaged. Filmmakers can make films that deal with social issues and try and shed light on things. There is another way in which film can affect change and that is through the creation of publics that consume the film. The films can be the basis of having a broader conversation.

The Index: How do you see the development of film as a way of social change?

Babli Sinha: There a lot of interesting filmmakers out there doing really radical things, sometimes these filmmakers are avant-garde and sometimes they are more conventional. At the same time, it's as difficult as ever to gain access to certain kinds of film. The new technology allows people to consume films more easily than ever, but it

also means the demise of the decline of movie theatres and that process of watching films as part of a community rather than in isolation.