

Programme Notes

Monday 6th July 8pm

BEFORE MIDNIGHT – A PORTRAIT OF INDIA ON FILM, 1899 - 1947



At the stroke of midnight on 14/15 August 1947 India finally achieved independence from Britain. Sixty years on, *Before Midnight* offers access to an unparalleled collection of films from the BFI National Archive exploring life in India during the early 20th century.

Some of the most potent records are to be found in the home movies - many of which are being made publicly available for the first time. The Maharajah of Jodhpur's home movies provide an epic portrait of princely power in the 1940s, whilst those of the Craster family offer an intimate picture of British family life. The programme takes us on a journey from the Northwest Frontier to Lahore, Rajasthan to Darjeeling and beyond. *Before Midnight* offers an unrivalled portrait of how lives - both Indian and British - were led across the Subcontinent.

The Films:

AN INDIAN WASHING THE BABY (1906)

India's cleanest child enjoys an enthusiastic wash and Ayurvedic massage. Baby massage might only recently have made it big in North London, but it has a very long tradition in India. Just after birth the baby is massaged with a dough ball dipped in almond oil to expel toxins, aid digestion and improve circulation. Massage with the hands begins when the baby is one month old and can continue for over 18 months, ensuring that the baby's limbs are supple and skin is soft. Traditionally, the baby would be massaged on its mother's legs, as seen in this film.

THE WONDERFUL FRUIT OF THE TROPICS (1914 extracts)

India's fruit harvest appears all the more delicious given that the film is tinted. Coloured tints were applied to the film using stencils.

CRASTER FAMILY HOME MOVIES (c1933)

The Craster family home movies offer a charming snapshot of filmmaker George and daughter Mary at home at Jotwara, Rajasthan. Colonel George Craster had a long and distinguished career in the Indian Army and was first commissioned in 1898. He retired in 1930 and became Chief Staff Officer of Jaipur State where these films were taken. The films also feature the Craster family menagerie — Baba (a bull terrier), Vanya (a cross-bred 'mistake' — born of the union between the Maharajah's pedigree Alsatian and a Borzoi!) and Mus (Mary's first pony). There was also a rather larger and more occasional 'pet' in the form of Lakshmi, one of the Maharajah of Jaipur's elephants who often came to the house to provide a rather exclusive ride for Mary.

DELHI (1933 extract)



As much a test for showing off Jack Cardiff's Technicolor cinematography as a portrait of Delhi, this short film presents the city — and the period — as rarely seen before. After a brief historical and architectural preamble, the film moves into an extended sequence, clearly designed to flaunt stunningly coloured saris among the gardens of the Red Fort.

IN RURAL MAHARASHTRA (1940)



Happy farmers, a wedding and some giant cauliflowers... Described as "the land of smiling people," rural Maharashtra in west India is the setting of this film. In this quaint look at country life, the roles of the smiling farmer and his wife are clearly played by professional actors in a style reminiscent of Indian films of the time. They frequently look as if they are about to burst into song. The film was produced by the Prabhat Film company - then one of India's

leading feature film production companies - for the Films Division of the Government of India.

CLARMONT SKRINE'S HOME MOVIES (c1946)

Clarmont Skrine - known in India as 'Skrino' - had a long career as 'an envoy of the Raj'. During his time as a Resident in South India a friend wrote: "He was so unlike the stereotyped ICS [Indian Civil Service] dignitaries (the Heaven-born), he was so human and approachable." Skrine was not an ambitious man, but was apparently much more interested in his two big passions - exploration and, luckily for us, photography. These extracts show Skrine and his wife on a trip to Bundi, Rajasthan. The footage captures numerous details of the city's spectacular architecture including the Taragarh Fort and Bundi Palace which Kipling described as "such a palace as men build for themselves in uneasy dreams - the work of goblins rather than of men".

THE MAHARAJA OF JODHPUR'S HOME MOVIES (c1947)



The BFI National Archive looks after the astonishing home movie collection of Maharajah Ummed Singh, ruler of the Indian princely state of Jodhpur between 1918 and 1947, and his illustrious family. While much work remains to be done on researching the people and places they depict, these films represent an invaluable record of princely power in the days of the Raj.

These extracts feature a vast procession to Jodhpur which is likely to be the funeral of Maharajah Ummed Singh, who died on 9 June 1947. The corpse is burned and offerings are thrown onto the funeral pyre. Note the men's turbans: white is the colour of mourning in India.

TINS FOR INDIA (1941)

Ever wondered about the number of uses an empty kerosene tin can be put to? This film tells us that the kerosene tin is as common a site as a palm tree and a bullock cart in the 'real' India, the rural India. The film shows the production of a tin and the different ways in which it is used after it has fulfilled its destiny as a holder of kerosene. Directed and photographed by Bimal Roy — one of Indian cinema's greatest directors — *Tins for India* was made over a decade before the major success of features such as *Devdas* and *Parineeta*.

NOAKHALI MARCH (1946)

The film shows Mahatma Gandhi's visit to Noakhali, after the Hindu-Muslim riots (variously known as the Calcutta riots and the Noakhali Massacre) in 1946. The film includes shots of Susheela Nayar (Gandhi's doctor), Mann Gandhi (his granddaughter) and Jawaharlal Nehru and was shot by Kanu Gandhi - Gandhi's great nephew. Kanu was a member of Gandhi's personal staff and they worked closely together until his assassination on 30 January 1948. Kanu was one of the most important chroniclers of Gandhi's life. He was given his first stills camera in 1936 and began to document the great man's final years on three conditions: that he would not use flash photography; that the ashram would not fund him and that Gandhi would never pose. He had exclusive access to Gandhi and was therefore able to capture shots that would elude any other photographers. Kanu's photographs formed the basis of a number of the shots in Richard Attenborough's biopic, *Gandhi* (1982).