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**Rosie Thomas**

School of Media, Arts and Design

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## ***Miss Frontier Mail:* The Film That Mistook Its Star for a Train**

ROSIE THOMAS



*We hereby inform the public that our Rail-Road Thriller, Miss Frontier Mail, has no connections whatsoever with the well-known "Frontier Mail" of the B.B. & C.I. Railway. It refers to the name of the heroine of the story and not to any train whatsoever in India.*

*Miss Frontier Mail* publicity booklet, May 1936<sup>1</sup>

Four weeks before *Miss Frontier Mail's* release in May 1936, producer J.B.H. Wadia was contacted by an angry B.B. & C.I. Railway company official complaining that he had betrayed their trust. The company had allowed Wadia's crew to film on their trains and tracks. He had rewarded them with *Frontier Mail*, a film about the dangers of rail travel, starring India's top female box-office draw, Fearless Nadia. Advertising it throughout the country with a graphic image of a train crash, a misguided publicist had added: "By kind permission of the B.B. & C.I. Railway Company". Keen to appease the railway owners but ever the opportunist, J.B.H. Wadia immediately instigated a national newspaper campaign to find a new name for the film. Thousands of suggestions flooded in from the public, from amongst which the simple addition of "*Miss*" to "*Frontier Mail*" seemed least likely to cause complications for a completed film awaiting imminent release.<sup>2</sup> As a tongue-in-cheek aside, the above disclaimer ran across all subsequent publicity. The film went on to become one of Wadia Movietone's top earners.

This essay explores the question: what did it mean to call Fearless Nadia “Miss Frontier Mail”? More broadly, what might it mean to call a woman a train? Moreover, how did the lure of ‘the frontier’ function in this sobriquet?

I examine *Miss Frontier Mail* – the only 1930s film of Nadia’s heyday to have survived in its entirety – to explore themes of modernity, gender and national identity. I suggest that whilst the filmmakers ostensibly chose “Frontier Mail” as the heroine’s nickname because of its connotations as the acme of speed and modernity, the notion of the frontier – as liminal zone – formed a subtext to the star persona of Nadia, and to the Wadia stunt oeuvre as a whole.

In 1936 the Frontier Mail train was the height of glamorous modernity, its name synonymous with speed, sophistication and the adventure of the railways. Launched in 1928 and upgraded with (some) air-conditioning in 1934, it was India’s most prestigious and fastest long-distance train, its 72-hour route – Bombay, Delhi, Lahore, Peshawar – unequivocally exotic.<sup>3</sup> Its brochure advertised “all the comforts of a first-class hotel”: imported iced beer on tap, an opulent dining car with continental and Indian cuisine, including its renowned chicken curry, served on meticulously laid white damask tablecloths, and free daily news bulletins telegraphed along the line direct from Reuters.<sup>4</sup> Its punctuality was legendary: Bombay folk were said to set their clocks by the arc of floodlights switched on over the B.B. & C.I. headquarters each evening to announce the safe arrival of the train. The *Frontier Mail* embodied the quintessentially modern sense of time and space of the railways, the formerly unthinkable equation between speed and distance that Schivelbusch called “the new reality of annihilated in-between spaces”<sup>5</sup>. But its name encoded much more.

Both the railways and the frontier were romantic but ambivalent signifiers in the Indian colonial imagination. The northwest frontier was a wild ‘Other’ to Bombay’s cosmopolitan modernity: a space of danger and excitement where mythically macho tribesmen had for centuries defended India against invaders.<sup>6</sup> The Frontier Mail raced from Bombay to the Afghan border and back on a daily basis, a tangible hunk of metal linking centre and periphery. As a symbolic, if poignant, evocation of the sheer size and scale of India, such a train undoubtedly helped both to imagine and to define the new nation.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the northwest frontier was a strategic outpost of the Raj, a place where colonial armies defended ‘their’ territory against the world. The very existence of the railway network and a superfast train in which functionaries of the British Raj travelled in luxury to the outposts of their empire was a sharp reminder of the colonial project and all its evils. As Kerr notes: “Railways made the Indian state and hence the Indian nation possible”<sup>8</sup>.

*Miss Frontier Mail* (dir. Homi Wadia, 1936) offers a fascinating filmic take on such ambivalence, set in motion by the playful equation between its star and the train. Our first glimpse of the heroine, Fearless Nadia, is dramatically anticipated by a comic build-up, which immediately conflates her with the Frontier Mail. “Sister! Savita! Frontier Mail!” yells her kid brother Jayant. “Are you calling a woman or a train?” retorts a buffoonish postman, who is waving a telegram he has brought for Miss Savita. When Savita finally appears, we are in little doubt as to who (or what) she might be. Flanked by the grand pillars of her

verandah, Fearless Nadia, a glamorous blonde, emerges into the upper half of the frame in her hunting gear: jodhpurs, cinched waist, frilly-shouldered blouse, beret and *bindi*, with a rifle in her hand and a pistol in her pocket. Thus begins an ongoing conflation of ideas about speed, modernity, Westernisation and the performance of 'femininity' in relation to received notions of contemporary Indian womanhood.

*Miss Frontier Mail* came just one year after the unprecedented success of *Hunterwali* (Woman with the Whip, dir. Homi Wadia, 1935), the stunt film which had launched Wadia Movietone's sensational new star, Fearless Nadia, a buxom, white-skinned, blue-eyed singer/dancer/acrobat of Australian origin, who had debuted in cabaret and circus. Based on Douglas Fairbanks' *Mark of Zorro* and integrated with the conventions of urban Parsi theatre and the developing norms of India's emergent national cinema, *Hunterwali* had been set in a Ruritanian kingdom, with Nadia playing a Robin Hood-style princess who disguised herself in mask, cloak and hot pants, brandished a whip, and rescued her kingdom's oppressed from a ruthless tyrant. *Hunterwali* ran for over 25 weeks in Bombay, became Delhi's first blockbuster, and spawned an unofficial merchandising industry of Fearless Nadia matchboxes, whips and belts.

*Miss Frontier Mail* was her second big success and, whilst capitalising on Nadia's unique star appeal, was in no simple sense a sequel. Although a recognisable ensemble of actors reappeared, and underlying story structures were similar, there were distinctive changes in setting, characters and even camera and editing style. *Miss Frontier Mail* was unambiguously set in the modern world, with Nadia playing a fashionable young woman fond of tennis, weightlifting and driving fast cars – when she wasn't out hunting in jodhpurs and jaunty beret, or genteelly sipping tea in a stylish sari on the sofa of her art deco bungalow. Whilst story, setting and structure were fully 'Indianised', the film, like its predecessor, drew overtly on popular Hollywood comedy and action serials, with Nadia billed, from *Hunterwali* onwards, as "India's Pearl White"<sup>9</sup>.

*Miss Frontier Mail* tells of the fight between Savita Devi (Fearless Nadia) – on behalf of the good people of Lalwadi – and a wicked villain (Sayani) who disguises himself as the mysterious Signal X and wreaks mayhem in the community. With his gang of "rail ke daku" (railway gangsters) and his vampish floozy Gulab (Gulshan), Signal X orchestrates a series of robberies and murders on the railways and then frames innocent men for the crimes. He is in fact Savita's uncle Shyamlal, and in the pay of a millionaire aeroplane company owner who wants to undermine public confidence in the railways to boost his own profits. After a series of fast-paced adventures, 'thrills', spectacular fights, murders, kidnappings, heroic rescues and a rail crash, Savita's daring and determination expose Shyamlal, who is finally shot down by police as he tries to escape in the airline tycoon's plane.

Woven through this narrative are a number of threads. There is a romance between Savita and Sunder, the railway president's charming son (Sardar Mansoor), which is

paralleled by a token, secondary romance between the rehabilitated vamp Gulab and Kishore (John Cawas), the heroic son of a reformed gang member. Well-developed comedy strands run through the film, the most important focusing on fresh-faced youth: Jayant (Jaidev) – Savita's kid brother turned amateur filmmaker – and his clown-like, banana-loving pal, Munchi Thoothi. The railway gangsters are also played for laughs: they are bumbling, rebellious incompetents who would really prefer to spend their time in drunken debauchery and song, and whose scenes provide interludes of music and comedy throughout.

Spectacular visual displays establish the Fearless Nadia persona. These include scenes of her exercising in her home gym, with a halo of blonde curls, bulging white thighs and the briefest of gym-vests; scenes of her beating up hapless *goondas* (thugs) atop moving trains; images of her modelling fashionable tennis whites as she flirts with her handsome lover in a railway signal-box; and the drama of her coolly mocking the villain when, sari-clad and indomitable, she corners and confronts him in his lair – the entire role enacted with a knowing, comic playfulness.

Paralleling the succession of scenes of Savita's heroism are others which build up the perfidy of her wicked uncle Shyamlal. He frames his own brother (her father) for a murder he has himself committed; he frames Savita's paramour Sunder, for a major rail crash he has himself engineered; he double-crosses his lover Gulab and, when she uncovers his perfidy, he callously shoots her, leaving her to die (he believes) on the railway tracks. Contrasting with Savita's risqué but ultimately moral modernity, his is a caricature of arch-modernity: he communicates with his gangsters and moll through a futuristic radio signalling system and lives in a show-house of technological excess.<sup>10</sup> But beyond these routine plot devices – the fight between good and evil, a romance between hero and heroine – the film is structured around a key opposition between speed and slowness, set in motion primarily through comedy.

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*Running for the tenth week at a stretch to crowded houses is the simplest and best way to describe the popularity of Wadia's... picture "Miss Frontier Mail". Not only has the picture gained unprecedented popularity, but the word "SPEED" seems to have been so very well ingrained in the minds of spectators that seven out of every ten persons leaving the local Lamington Talkies involuntarily exclaim: "MY GOD! WHAT SPEED!"*

*Bombay Chronicle*, 29 July 1936

In the days running up to its release on 29 May 1936, *Miss Frontier Mail* had been trailed in the *Bombay Chronicle* as the "fastest feature of Indian filmdom". "CRASHES, SMASHES, FIGHTS, DANGERS, STUNTS, ACROBATS" had all been promised for the delight of audiences at the Wadia brothers' "Speediest Diamond Thriller"<sup>11</sup>. Quite what this unseemly assault on the audience's sensibilities might have entailed, becomes apparent in the first reel.

*Miss Frontier Mail*'s opening scenes forcefully remind us how recently silent films had been in production. Using storytelling conventions of the silent era, the film begins with a

schematic, shadowy robbery and murder at Lalwadi railway station which introduces the sinister figure of Signal X. Music and costume code character (villains wear black, goodies white); there is no dialogue; and the action, much of it hazy long shots of gang members, is almost incomprehensible to an audience unused to the codes. The next scene is played as pure slapstick in the tradition of international silent comedy of the times: Jayant, Savita's kid brother, hand-cranks a camera, laughingly filming the antics of the buffoonish Munchi Thoothi who is attempting to pick bananas and falling off ladders. Only halfway through this – and almost seven minutes into the film – does any dialogue begin, as Jayant calls out: "Run here! Come quickly!" After a comic interaction between the youngsters and the bumbling postman who brings Savita (Nadia) a telegram, Savita's dramatic entry introduces a stilted, stagily theatrical scene.

It is only once Savita 'borrows' the postman's bicycle to catch the city-bound train to her father's disciplinary hearing that the visual style becomes more fluid – as if audiences needed to be gently inducted on the cinematic journey towards faster-paced conventions. Parallel action is now convincingly intercut for suspense. Savita a.k.a "Frontier Mail" swerves along on the postman's bicycle, whooping her trademark "Hey-y-y" whilst slapstick vignettes anticipate – then follow – the havoc she causes on her way, sending people, ladders, chickens and fruit-baskets flying. Crosscut with this, the Frontier Mail train makes its way in to the station: the minute-by-minute race against time neatly condensed through shots of the moving train reflected in a ticking station clock, intercut with close-ups of train wheels, puffing engine, railway tracks and suchlike.

These first 12 minutes effectively establish the film's mode as comedy, set up a self-referential discourse about cinema itself, and introduce speed as the film's key obsession. "My God! What speed!" is a not unreasonable response to the film's multiple layers. On a literal level the film's first words ("Run here! Come quickly!") set the agenda, as does much of its surface imagery – frenetic activity, careering bicycles, clocks and hurtling trains. At a metaphorical level, identification of Savita/Nadia with both whirlwinds (*toofan*) and trains sets up a motif that will recur. Speed is also encoded within the film's visual style through fast crosscutting and the accelerated pace of tension and suspense. And at its core the film is a balancing act between tight linear narrative and a looser comedy track, much of which itself revolves around an opposition between 'speed' and 'slowness'.

The linear structure is conventionally well crafted. The film develops through three acts of almost equal length (around 50 minutes each).<sup>12</sup> Through and against this classic narrative, and cushioning the 'thrills' of the main action, runs a meandering, surreal, non-linear thread: a beautifully developed comedy track, with absurdist digressions on the subject of bananas. Munchi Thoothi, "Champion Banana Master", is a good-natured, apparently dim-witted, clown-like youth with droopy moustache and shaven head, from the front of which arises an absurd *choti* (single tuft of long hair on a shaven head), at times improbably erect, at others sadly flaccid, parodying the tonsure of traditionalist, orthodox Hindu males. Munchi Thoothi is Jayant's "*bhola-bhala dost*", his "innocent friend", green

about the gills, laconic, vulnerable, the classic ingénue of silent comedy. In this fast-paced world Munchi Thoothi is the only person who takes his time. Slow in all senses of the word, he is a low-tech non-rationalist who is obsessed with bananas, synonymous in popular Hindi parlance with valuelessness.<sup>13</sup>

Savita's two companions pop up with their film camera and bananas throughout the film, establishing and embellishing its light, comic-book mood, signalling to the viewer that this is an absurd universe, both preposterous and fun. Tempering and contextualising the patent excessiveness of Nadia's playful heroism, their interventions defuse her potential sophistication, toughness and erotic charge. But behind their nonsense lie hints of more serious themes, including an implicit lampooning of cinema and cine-voyeurism (and hence modernity). "The camera's never ready when you find a good shot"<sup>14</sup>, they rue, stumbling upon a seemingly intimate and erotic moment between Savita and Sunder in the gym, which the cinema audience has, of course, just seen. And in the film's comic coda where the two central couples, united at last, are canoodling in the grass, the amateur filmmakers turn up again, gleefully preparing to capture these indiscretions on camera – only to be frogmarched off by Savita and Sunder's indulgent fathers, leaving the love-birds to parody a screen kiss for the cinema audience: teasingly concealed, of course, in the film's final moment.

Jayant and Munchi Thoothi's antics are neatly interwoven with the action, at times even driving plot development. Where trains, cameras and "Miss Frontier Mail" speed things up, bananas cause a fatal delay in this frantic universe.<sup>15</sup> Where Savita is 'fast', worldly-wise and erotically charged, Munchi Thoothi is 'slow', innocent and ambiguously sexual. Where Savita is associated with the hard, shiny phallic tools of guns and trains, Munchi Thoothi's world comprises soft bananas and a floppy quiff.

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I began by asking what it might mean to call a woman a train and, in particular, to call Fearless Nadia "Miss Frontier Mail". Most obviously, Fearless Nadia/Savita is as fast as the Frontier Mail, India's speediest train, and hence as modern: speed becomes a gloss for modernity.<sup>16</sup> Beyond this, other similarities, perhaps frivolously, suggest themselves: both woman and train were glamorous stars of 1930s Bombay (the train's nightly arrival literally illuminated the city skyline); both performed extraordinary physical feats (agility, strength and speed respectively); both had Western origins and European associations; and both travelled from centre to periphery and back again (Nadia spent her formative teenage years and much of her twenties in the northwest frontier region). Furthermore, the equation constructs Nadia as not just exciting and desirable, but 'hard', 'hot', 'steamy' – sexual innuendo which recalls the psychoanalytic commonplace through which trains and fetishistically attired women become dream-work substitutions for the phallus.<sup>17</sup> In addition, Nadia is firmly in control of Westernised technology – she rides the trains' roofs, drives cars, shoots guns.

But there are other associations within the Indian colonial context. The ambivalent appeal of the railways and, by extension, of Westernised modernity itself – a key theme of

nationalist debate – echoes the ambivalent appeal of Nadia. I have discussed elsewhere how the Wadia brothers negotiated Nadia's European origins to produce her, through a process of mimicry in reverse, as a nationalist, Indian heroine.<sup>18</sup> She was 'not quite white' – and also 'not quite (Pearl) White'. Her 'white' European origins, simultaneously recognised and disavowed, undoubtedly fed the ambivalent frisson of her erotic appeal in the classic colonial miscegenation fantasy. She was India's own Hollywood star, India's unapologetic, droll appropriation of Pearl White's potent global brand.<sup>19</sup>

But Fearless Nadia was a liminal figure in more ways than one. Throughout *Miss Frontier Mail*, jocular male banter repeatedly questions her womanhood. Just after Savita has pummelled an office full of railway clerks to pulp, a bewildered *babu* puns: "She came like Toofan Mail, fought like Punjab Mail and left at the speed of wind like Frontier Mail"<sup>20</sup>. Savita is as speedy as the Toofan Mail and as combative as a Punjabi male. She is simultaneously Miss Frontier Mail, a super-fast train, and Miss Frontier Male, a woman on the borderline/frontier of masculinity.

For more than three-quarters of her screen time Savita wears 'masculinised' outfits. She is physically active, fights energetically and does bodybuilding in her home gym. Moreover, her image is boldly sexualised: she exposes more flesh than any other screen heroine – or vamp – and can cartwheel half-naked from her gym-horse into the arms of the fiancé she has herself chosen, without detracting from her moral authority at the centre of the film. Whilst such freedoms are conventionally the prerogative of the male domain, there is a precedent for independent, sexually assertive womanhood in India's historical and legendary cross-dressing warrior women known as '*viraangana*'. When the British censored overt references to the Independence movement after 1910, historical figures such as Lakshmbai, Queen of Jhansi, became the focus for nationalist activism, enthusiastically celebrated in popular theatre, early cinema and calendar art. The Nadia persona with its masculinised dress, sexual freedom and celebration of both physical and moral strength neatly reworks what Hansen memorably dubs "this startling counter-paradigm" of Indian womanhood.<sup>21</sup>

The Wadias constructed in Nadia a *viraangana* for a modern world, a *viraangana* who is also a train, a *viraangana*-on-wheels. Nadia thereby bridges Western modernity and Indian traditionalism. The key to Nadia's appeal lies in her fluidity: male/female; white/not quite white; Pearl White/not quite Pearl White; modern woman/traditional warrior; the speediness of modern technology/a playful comic character. She is a canvas across which multiple identities can be played to forge a new modern Indian femininity. With the film itself tempering the appeal of speed with comedic slowness, the signifiers of Westernised modernity become reworked as distinctively Indian.

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Wadia brothers' stunt films starring Fearless Nadia, (mostly) directed by Homi and written and produced by Jamshed (J.B.H.) Wadia, were the biggest earners of the mid- to late 1930s. Costing an unprecedented Rs 1.25 lakh, *Miss Frontier Mail* recouped almost double that on first release,<sup>22</sup> running for 14 weeks at its first-run Bombay theatre before doing the



rounds of lower-class cinemas. Even into its fourth week in Delhi it boasted needing 50 policemen to control unruly crowds.<sup>23</sup>

Histories of Indian cinema invariably celebrate 1936 as the year Bombay Talkies released *Achhut Kanya* and changed the course of Indian cinema history.<sup>24</sup> New Theatres' *Devdas* (1935), which established the maudlin romantic hero for decades to come, was also still running, whilst Prabhat's *Sant Tukaram*, a devotional about the legendary *bhakti* singer/saint, was heralded for its 'authentic' traditionalism. Whilst all were undoubtedly landmark films and indeed successful at the box office, they were also heavily hyped by the highbrow critics and bourgeois papers whose ideals they reflected.

In fact, a wide range of films was released in 1936. More than half were stunt, action and costume films. Heavyweight social melodramas and devotionals were in a distinct minority. Moreover, judging by advertisements in the *Bombay Chronicle*, fighting women were everywhere that year. A young Mehboob Khan directed *Deccan Queen*, a full-scale stunt film, for Sagar Movietone, starring a cheated but feisty heiress battling against her kingdom's evildoers. India's entry to the 1936 Venice film festival was V. Shantaram's *Amar Jyoti* (Eternal Light). Billed as "the story of Rebel Womanhood" and featuring fights and swordplay in a colourful Ruritanian seaport kingdom, it starred Durga Khote as "a ruthless pirate...and yet a loving mother"<sup>25</sup>. Elsewhere Sulochana, the superstar of the silent era, promised alluringly: "I am coming to loot the rich and help the poor, I am wildcat of Bombay," with her 1936 sound remake of *Bambai ki Billi* (Wildcat of Bombay), in which she played eight roles including policeman, pickpocket, Hyderabad gentleman and European blonde.<sup>26</sup> Even historical films touted spectacular action sequences and valiant female warriors: Ajit Movietone's *Sultana Chandbibi*, trumpeted as "Glowing Romance of an Amazon – Queen of the Deccan", was based on a real 16<sup>th</sup>-century queen who died in battle resisting Mughal capture.<sup>27</sup>

Reading J.B.H. Wadia's unpublished memoirs – and most discussion of Nadia to date – one might be forgiven for thinking that this was the *Hunterwali* effect. Whilst *Hunterwali* undoubtedly firmly established action women within the talkie film, the *viraangana* motif had long been in vogue in silent cinema. The Wadias did not invent the masked fighting cinema heroine, nor was Nadia their first. Their own prototype for Fearless Nadia was Padma, a petite, beautiful Bengali star cast as a masked, whip-cracking saviour of the people in their *Dilruba Daku* (The Amazon, dir. Homi Wadia, 1933)<sup>28</sup>, another *Mark of Zorro* remake and the brothers' last silent film.

But even in 1933, Padma was not alone. A sword-fighting, jodhpur- and boot-clad Ermeline (a.k.a Patty Cordoza) starred in *Azaad Abla* (Daring Damsel, 1933) at the Super cinema that June.<sup>29</sup> Ads in *Mouj Majah* invited viewers to see her "*parakram*"<sup>30</sup> and gushed, "Hands which embraced her beloved now hold a sword to fight tyranny and avenge her father..." It ran for over two months. Nor was this recent. In 1931 the same actress was the active heroine of *Toofani Taruni* (Cyclone Girl) and *Golibar* (Avenging Angel), whilst Indira/Miss Paterson played *Bijli* (Miss Lighting). Not only were these both Anglo-



Indian/European actresses, but their films' titles suggest that *Miss Frontier Mail*'s equation between speed and modern womanhood was by no means so original. In fact, newspapers reveal that a plethora of active, booted females – many of them European or Anglo-Indian – had been hitting the Indian silent screen since at least 1925.<sup>31</sup>

Curiously, whilst J.B.H.'s writings reveal nothing of this local tradition, he always enthusiastically acknowledged his debt to his Hollywood heroes, whose material he so skilfully 'Indianised'. Throughout the 1920s both he and Homi had been avid fans of the American fare that filled 85% of Indian silent screen time: comedies, thrillers, westerns – Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, Douglas Fairbanks. Particular favourites were the 'daring misses' of Hollywood's action serials: Pearl White, Ruth Roland, Helen Holmes.<sup>32</sup> The Wadias' half-dozen silent films between 1928 and 1933 were frank adaptations of Hollywood, notably Douglas Fairbanks' 'thrillers'. *Toofan Mail* (dir Homi Wadia, 1932), "India's first 100% railroad thriller" and an overnight success, was directly inspired by Helen Holmes' railroad serials, and in turn inspired *Miss Frontier Mail*. But even filming a railroad movie on location in India was innovative, as J.B.H. recalls in amusing anecdotes of *Toofan Mail*'s youthful crew and their hair-raising antics on the roofs and tracks of moving suburban Bombay trains.<sup>33</sup>

As sons of a respectable Parsi shipbuilding family, the Wadias' success as small-scale, stunt film producers for the C-grade circuit in the silent era had been mildly scandalous. Setting up Wadia Movietone in 1933, they temporarily abandoned the stunt genre for more 'respectable' Parsee theatre-inspired musical 'costume' dramas. *Lale-Yaman* (1933), their talkie debut, boasted classical songs and dances in an Arabian Nights milieu. But with *Hunterwali*'s phenomenal 1935 box-office success, a return to stunt films became irresistible. Alongside Nadia's 'Diamond Thriller' series were jungle films (Indian Tarzans), *daku* (dacoit/bandit) adventures and animal spectacles featuring performing horses and dogs. Advertisements of the day, even in upmarket English-language papers, sold the films as unabashed popular entertainment: "Wadia films spell speed and mean entertainment"<sup>34</sup>. *Hind Kesri*, an "animal thriller" starring trained horse "Punjab ka Beta (Son of Punjab)", brazenly targeted children of the snobbish bourgeois classes: "Serious subjects, my dear children, are for your parents. Let them see for themselves romances and tragedies... YOU... come and see me... and boast before your parents that of the entire family you were the most entertained"<sup>35</sup>. By the end of the decade Wadia Movietone was the most profitable studio in Bombay, releasing six or seven films a year, the majority aimed at the mass audience.

Although defiantly proud of his successful stunt films, J.B.H. Wadia, a qualified lawyer and cultured intellectual, was deeply upset by the derision he encountered from industry grandees. In later years he pointed out that "almost all Wadia Movietone films in the 1930s were woven around themes of political and social value", maintaining that "my much derided stunt films contained more progressive ideas in them than most of the so-called social films which have been successful mainly because of their reactionary ideology"<sup>36</sup>. Nadia's films did indeed tackle, amongst other things, Hindu-Muslim unity (*Lootaru Lalna*, 1938), caste iniquities (*Hurricane Hansa*, 1937) and women's education (*Diamond Queen*, 1940), reflecting J.B.H.'s

involvement with former Marxist M.N. Roy's radical humanist movement. *Miss Frontier Mail* is one of the few that doesn't wear its politics on its sleeve, although a critique of greedy capitalists, passing references to the nationalist movement, and an allegorical subtext, are easily uncovered. But its most "progressive ideas" emerge primarily through the film's formal structuring, reflecting the Wadias' own perspectives on modernity and national identity, situated as they were at the borders, not the centre, of the nationalist project.

Whilst Homi was always the pragmatic populist, Jamshed was torn between two visions of Indian modernity. Like the Congress intellectuals, he supported humanist social reform and celebrated Indian traditional arts; but he also understood market forces and saw that popular passions would be the seeds for new modern Indian identities, and that these could not be neatly imposed from above. Both brothers valued aspects of the West that bourgeois intellectuals dismissed as trash, as well as subaltern Indian entertainment forms. They saw no contradiction in forging an Indian modernity that embraced global popular culture.<sup>37</sup> Where Nehru et al. 'improvised' a modernity grounded in a notionally ur-Indian tradition, the Wadias offered a different solution to the ambivalence of Westernised modernity.<sup>38</sup> Valuing the pleasures and potential of comedy and visceral thrills, and playing these with skill, their films developed from – and built on – the vibrant eclecticism of India's by then disparaged silent cinema and early theatre. Moreover, the Wadias discreetly parodied their critics.

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"You really *are* Miss 1936", Sunder admiringly exclaims when Savita insists on driving off alone in her convertible to meet a gangster, with only her muscles, wits and trusty pistol to protect her. Not only was this shorthand for sophisticated, modern, urban womanhood, but also presumably a wry allusion to *Miss 1933* (dir. Chandulal Shah, 1933), a recently successful social melodrama starring her rival, Glorious Gohar. Such socials dealt largely through melodramatic pathos with problems of a modernising India, particularly the stresses placed on gender roles and modern marriages. The Wadias' modernisation comedy appears to gently lampoon the modernisation melodrama as well as offering its own take on Hollywood, using 'speed' – 'the watchword of this generation' and a key synonym for modernity – as its central term.<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, in the same month and paper as *Miss Frontier Mail* was being advertised for its 'speed', *Amar Jyoti* was praised by a *Bombay Chronicle* critic for its "slow tempo of dialogue, music..."<sup>40</sup>

*Miss Frontier Mail* is of course overtly about Westernised modernity: full of images of railways, aeroplanes, radio communication, bridges, speed and technological gizmos of a modern world – as well as images of filmmaking itself. It also uses accomplished special effects, technological wizardry and stunts to enhance its illusions and make us believe the impossible. It displays evidence – or a utopian fantasy – of women's newfound independence, confidence and mobility, with modern choices of clothes and leisure activities (tennis, gymnastics, hunting); whilst its storyline critiques Westernised capitalist greed and celebrates community.

However, the film reflects and engages with modernity more profoundly. As a ‘thriller’ whose pleasures depend heavily on emotional excitement and the visceral appeal of its action-packed tension – scaring, shocking, exhilarating its audiences – it echoes all that is deemed thrilling and exciting about modern city life itself, inducing the state of heightened awareness which Singer terms “hyperstimulation”<sup>41</sup>. Where the socials engage with issues around modernity as ‘themes’ within convoluted, melodramatic storylines, as well as through music and dance, *Miss Frontier Mail* deals with modernity head-on, through experiential engagement with its very form, at the same time crucially tempering its thrust with self-parodic humour that reflects Indian topical concerns and traditional entertainment forms.

Whilst the mainstream Bombay film industry increasingly wanted to close off pernicious Western and Islamic influences to celebrate an invented traditionalism within a Hindu ethos,<sup>42</sup> the Wadias’ modernity recognised the fluidity and hybridity of identities within the porous borders of a modern India in a transnational context. Drawing eclectically on global and Indian popular culture, their films offered an inclusive, hybrid, ludic space, within which Hollywood could be appropriated and redefined, and the pieties of the Indian mainstream lampooned in a feast of visceral exuberance.

Gandhi famously rejected Westernised modernity – notably the twin evils of speed and the railways. “Good travels at a snail’s pace – it can therefore have little to do with the railways...” he proclaimed provocatively in 1908.<sup>43</sup> The Wadias embraced Westernised modernity (and transnational popular culture) warmly, but reconfigured its ambivalent appeal on their own terms. They built in Nadia a potent fantasy of power and control within modernity: a *virangana*-on-wheels, an all-Indian warrior woman, Hollywood action serial queen, sari-clad Hindu daughter and knowingly preposterous comic-book heroine all rolled into one.

## Notes

1. An introductory title on the film itself reads: “NOTE: MISS FRONTIER MAIL SHOULD NOT BE CONFUSED IN ANY WAY WITH THE FRONTIER MAIL OF THE B.B. & C.I. RAILWAY COMPANY”.
2. Riyad Wadia, 1994: programme notes for screenings of *Miss Frontier Mail*. Personal correspondence, quoted courtesy of Wadia Movietone archive.
3. There had been fierce competition on this route, especially between G.I.P. (Great India Peninsular) Railway’s Punjab Mail and B.B. & C.I. (Bombay, Baroda and Central India) Railway’s earlier trains. The Frontier Mail, launched on 1 September 1928, finally reduced the 2,320-kilometre journey to a mere 72 hours, a day or so shorter than its rivals.  
Further anecdotal details at <http://irfca.org/~shankie/famoustrains/famtrainfrontier.htm>
4. K.R. Vaidyanathan. *150 Glorious Years of Indian Railways* (English Edition Publishers, 2003, Mumbai), p. 24. However, such luxury was reserved for first-class passengers. Its six carriages carried 450 people and included second- and third-class coaches. Nevertheless, its romantic aura made it a favourite with honeymooning couples in all classes.

5. Wolfgang Schivelbusch. *The Railway Journey* (University of California Press, 1986, Berkeley/Los Angeles), p. 42.
6. Newspapers of the mid-1930s suggest there may have been another contemporary resonance. 'Frontier Gandhi' a.k.a. Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan, was a devout Pashtun Muslim and leader of the non-violent independence movement in the Northwest Frontier Province. A close friend of Gandhi, he had refused the offer of the Congress Party presidency in 1931.
7. As Paul Theroux put it: "The railway possessed India and made her hugeness graspable". In (eds.) Michael Satow and Ray Desmond, *Railways of the Raj* (New York University Press, 1980, New York), pp. 6-7.
8. (Ed.) Ian J. Kerr, *Railways in Modern India* (Oxford University Press, 2001, Delhi), p. 56. His introductory essay summarises the complex topic of the railways and Indian nationalism. See also Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton University Press, 1999, Princeton), pp. 161-70, for discussion of the importance of the railways to the colonial project.
9. Pearl White was the most popular of Hollywood's silent stunt stars, known globally for serials such as *Perils of Pauline* (1914) and *Exploits of Elaine* (1915), all of which ran successfully in India.
10. Riyad Wadia's programme notes suggest an anti-Nazi theme was also intended here.
11. *Bombay Chronicle*, 1 August 1936.
12. Act One establishes villains and heroes: two murders are committed, an innocent man is framed and the heroes' love story begins. Act Two is built around a classic reversal structure: the heroes foil the villains' attempts to crash a train, but the villain then destroys the evidence that will incriminate his gang. The romance between hero and heroine develops, that between villain and vamp begins to flounder. In Act Three the villains succeed in engineering a train crash for which the master villain is richly rewarded; but eventually the heroes unmask and destroy him. Two romantic couples are united: hero and heroine, and second hero and reformed vamp.
13. Western modernity is understood to have emerged as a result of rationalism (science) and capitalism. Whether this is an appropriate model for Indian modernity was a point of debate in contemporary nationalist circles.
14. "*Jab acchha picture milta hai tabhi camera tayyaar nahin...*"
15. Their camera records the villains laying dynamite on the railway tracks, and Munchi Thoothi's banana fixation both helps and hinders the action: the villains steal a film-can containing his bananas instead of the incriminating footage, but later his unhurried enjoyment of a banana gives Signal X time to destroy that footage.
16. Throughout the film Nadia is equated with speed – not just fast trains, but whirlwinds (*toofan*), lightning, electricity. At one point her uncle introduces her: "Her nickname is Frontier Mail, that's why she reached here like lightning". In colloquial parlance, women who embrace the sexual mores of (Westernised) modernity are, of course, referred to as "fast".
17. Interestingly, the nickname that stuck, and which still endures amongst her older fans, is not *Miss Frontier Mail* but *Hunterwali* – "the woman with the whip".
18. "Not Quite (Pearl) White", in (eds.) Raminder Kaur and Ajay Sinha, *Bollyworld* (Sage, 2004, New Delhi), pp. 35-69.

19. See also Ashish Rajadhyaksha's discussion of her as a "spoof" of Hollywood stardom in "The Importance of Fearless Nadia", *The Times of India*, 28 January 1996.
20. "Woh ladki Toofan Mail ki tarah aayee, Punjab Mail ki tarah maar-peet karke Frontier Mail ban kar hawa ho gayee". To which he adds a further absurdist comment on modernity's obsession with time: "Meri baneebanaayee ghadi ka satyanaash kar diya (She destroyed my clock which I had just repaired)".
21. Kathryn Hansen, *Grounds for Play* (University of California Press, 1992, Berkeley), pp. 188-98. My "Not Quite (Pearl) White" essay (op. cit.) develops this argument at length in relation to Fearless Nadia and *Diamond Queen* (1940).
22. According to Riyad Wadia the production budget was an unprecedented Rs 1,25,000; and Wadia wrote to his technicians, "... spare no efforts in your pursuit of innovation and creativity". It recouped Rs 2,25,000 on first release, and by 1951 had been re-released nine times.
23. *Hindustan Times*, 19 June 1936.
24. See for example Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film* (Oxford University Press, 1980, Oxford), pp. 101-2; or Vijay Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire* (Routledge, 2002, New York/London).
25. *Bombay Chronicle*, 7 August 1936. There were, of course, many differences between the Fearless Nadia persona and Durga Khote's pirate queen, which I elaborate elsewhere. See also Priya Jaikumar, *Cinema at the End of Empire* (Duke University Press, 2006, Durham/London), pp. 218-25.
26. *Bombay Chronicle*, 15 January 1936. Details in (eds.) Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1994), pp. 232, 248.
27. *Bombay Chronicle*, 7 August 1936.
28. In the silent era films were commonly given both English and Hindi titles.
29. *Hunterwali* released at the same Super cinema two years later.
30. In Gujarati, "achievement/bravery/stunts". *Mouj Majah*, 20 August 1933.
31. This had been a mainstay of Parsee theatre. See Kathryn Hansen, "Making Women Visible", in (ed.) Selvy Thiruchandran, *Women, Narration and Nation* (Vikas Publishing House, 1999, New Delhi), pp. 22-48. See also Kaushik Bhaumik, *The Emergence of the Bombay Film Industry*, D.Phil thesis submitted to University of Oxford, 2001.
32. For a good overview of the serial queen melodramas, see Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity* (Columbia University Press, 2001, New York), pp. 59-99.
33. *Looking Back on My Romance with Films*, J.B.H. Wadia's unpublished memoirs.
34. *Bombay Chronicle*, 1 August 1936.
35. *Bombay Chronicle*, 21 January 1936.
36. From *Looking Back on My Romance with Films*, op. cit.
37. Although unaware of it at the time, in their championing of Hollywood's so-called 'low genres', the Wadias were in good company: the European avant-garde and surrealists were similarly captivated.
38. For an argument on the "improvisation" of Indian modernity, see Sudipta Kaviraj, "Modernity and Politics in India", in *Daedalus*, Vol. 129, Issue 1, pp. 152-54 (Winter 2000).

39. Another example of such parody is the film's comic coda in which the comedians try to film the lovers' final kisses. Given that the debate on mouth-to-mouth kissing was still highly topical – in 1932 there had been the scandal of Zubeida's 86 kisses in *Zarina* and, in 1933, Devika Rani's famous on-screen kiss in *Karma* – this was undoubtedly a knowing snub to the bourgeoisie.
40. *Bombay Chronicle*, 8 July 1936.
41. Ben Singer, op. cit., pp. 90-99. The film also offers the "fascination and terror" of the pleasure of the speed of the railways, as Lynne Kirby, via Schivelbusch, argues in relation to Hollywood silent films in *Parallel Tracks* (Duke University Press, 1997, Durham).
42. See Ravi Vasudevan, "The Politics of Cultural Address in a 'Transitional' Cinema", in (eds.) Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, *Rethinking Film Theory*, (Arnold, 2000, London), pp. 156-57. See also Kaushik Bhaumik, op. cit.
43. M.K. Gandhi. *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule* (Natal, 1910; Reprint Navajivan Karyalaya, 1938, Ahmedabad), p. 47.





TEXTS AND MARGINS