Modern Asian Studies (2023), **57**, 1449–1458
doi:10.1017/S0026749X2300015X

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

REVIEW ARTICLE

Rethinking the Second World War in South Asia: Between theatres and beyond battles

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(Received 23 February 2023; accepted 11 April 2023)

In the photograph in Figure 1, a white American soldier stationed in wartime India stands next to two large gramophones outside what appears to be a musical equipment store in Calcutta, possibly on Sudder Street.[1] The photographer, Glenn S. Hensley, was an American serviceman and a professional photographer. Like the unidentified man featured in the photograph, Hensley was among the nearly 200,000 American soldiers stationed in India during the final years of the Second World War. The uniformed man, clearly aware of the camera's presence, somewhat self-consciously points towards the gramophones and to the sound they were likely producing, as stores like this one often tried to draw in customers by playing gramophone records. This photograph is one of few to turn the lens on to the American soldiers themselves in Hensley's collection, which features photographs of Calcutta's street life, train stations, and landscapes. This photograph also gestures to one of the main themes in this special issue: the war's long-term effects on technologies and the arts in South Asia. After all, the image leaves us wondering what the gramophone could have been playing—perhaps a Hindustani classical music concert or one of the songs featured in the film *Rattan* released that year? Above all, however, the photograph seems like an apt place to begin our study because it can be read as an invitation to listen—to tune in—to the global war and its legacy in South Asia.

During the Second World War, India was under British rule and functioned as a military, industrial, and logistical base for Allied operations. The British government mobilized India's resources to pay for the war effort, and the Indian Army expanded dramatically, becoming the largest volunteer army in human history. Nearly two-and-half million Indian troops served and fought around the world, in all four theatres of the global conflict. Building on the pioneering work of historians Indivar Kamtekar, Yasmin Khan, and Srinath Raghavan, among others, this interdisciplinary special issue

[1]We thank Esha Meher for providing this important detail about the possible name of the street.

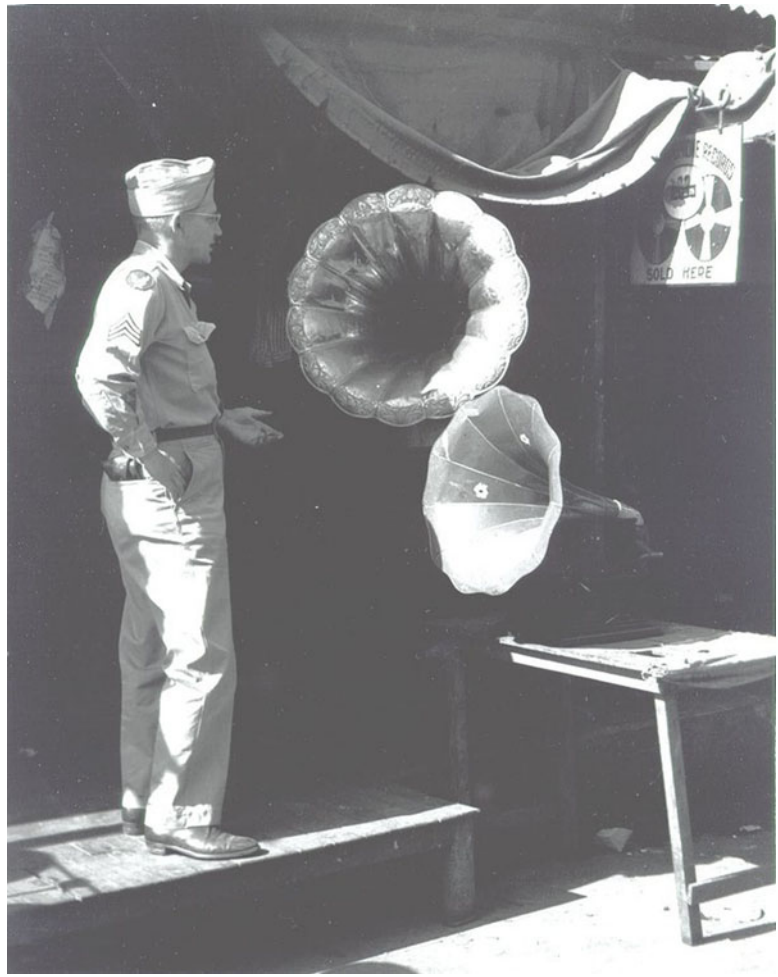

Figure 1. The photograph 'Phonograph for sale' from the collection of Glenn S. Hensley. *Source:* Provided courtesy of the Digital South Asia Library at the University of Chicago (http://dsal.uchicago.edu/).

argues for the centrality of the war to political, cultural, and economic developments in twentieth-century South Asia.[2] Raghavan has perceptively pointed out that,

[2]Indivar Kamtekar, 'A Different War Dance: State and Class in India, 1939–1945', *Past and Present* 176 (2002), pp. 189–221; Indivar Kamtekar, 'The Shiver of 1942', *Studies in History* 18:1 (2002), pp. 81–102; Yasmin Khan, *India at War: The Subcontinent and the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Srinath Raghavan, *India's War: World War II and the Making of Modern South Asia* (London: Penguin Books, 2016.) Other works that have influenced the approach of this special issue include Johannes H. Voigt, *India in the Second World War* (New Delhi: Arnold-Heineman, 1987); Christopher Bayly and Timothy Harper, *Forgotten Armies: the Fall of British Asia, 1941–1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2004); Christopher Bayly and Timothy Harper, *Forgotten Wars: Freedom and Revolution in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Janam Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal: War, Famine, and the End of Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X2300015X Published online by Cambridge University Press

unfortunately, many scholars of South Asia often mistakenly assume that the Second World War was merely a kind of 'mood music' surrounding, but not necessarily influencing, the anticolonial struggle and the subsequent independence and division of British-ruled India in 1947.[3] Alongside a growing body of scholarship on India and the war, this special issue hopes to put to rest the idea of the war as mere 'mood music' once and for all as it tunes in to its cultural, social, and technological reverberations in South Asia across the decades.

In addition to reconstructing some key events of the war in the region, the six authors—with expertise spanning history, media studies, and literature—rethink key issues in their respective fields of study by centring the global war. Two guiding questions connect the articles: How did the Second World War transform society in the Indian subcontinent during the transition from empire to independence? How might a perspective from South Asia allow us to reconsider the war's global trajectory and its technological, social, and cultural transformations?

Situating the special issue

As with many academic works, this project has its roots in an awkward conference interaction. In 2015, one of the co-editors (Isabel Huacuja Alonso) attended a history panel commemorating the seventieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War. During the panel, she asked about the war's influence on anticolonial movements, particularly in British colonies. The responses by the speakers made it clear that they felt that the story of the war's impact on British colonies, while significant within those countries, was ancillary to the 'main' story of the Second World War. In subsequent discussions with the issue's co-editor (Andrew Amstutz), we shared an unease about the respondents' comments, but also a sense that the study of the Second World War from a South Asian perspective could be a productive endeavour to rethink South Asia's role in modern world history.

By then an exciting and growing body of scholarship was already attending to the war in South Asia. Khan's book, alongside Kamtekar's earlier pioneering articles and Raghavan's book, had made clear India's military and financial contributions to the war Allied effort. Khan famously argued that Britain did not fight the Second World War, the British empire did.[4] Raghu Karnad's popular nonfiction account about the experiences of his own family members provided an intimate and familial account of the war.[5] Moreover, the Bengal Famine and its relationship to the global war and imperial politics has been extensively studied. Recent scholarship on the famine—its causes, its uneven impact across the region, and its connections to local and imperial politics—has expanded on earlier pioneering scholarly work.[6] Yet, despite these

2015); and Urvi Kahitan, 'Women Beneath the Surface: Coal and the Colonial State in India during the Second World War', *War and Society* 39:3, pp. 171–188.

[3]See Raghavan, *India's War.*

[4]See footnote 2.

[5]Raghu Karnad, *Farthest Field: A Story of India's Second World War* (London: William Collins, 2015).

[6]For a partial list of scholarship on the wartime famine in Bengal, see Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981); Paul Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943–1944* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Sugata Bose,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X2300015X Published online by Cambridge University Press

important contributions, we felt that scholars of South Asia had yet to fully grapple with the long-term, multifaceted cultural, technological, and social effects of the Second World War in the region. The war's story still remained largely overshadowed in South Asian studies scholarship, much like in public memory, by the 1947 partition of India and independence.

The potential of further interdisciplinary studies of the Second World War from South Asia was confirmed by our classroom experiences. In the beginning stages of this project, both of us taught at large, teaching-oriented public universities where our duties included teaching broad world history surveys. While there were, of course, challenges to teaching such broad classes, these courses also presented a vital opportunity to rethink Eurocentric accounts of world events and to introduce a diverse group of students to South Asian studies. We both found that lectures on the Second World War focusing on South Asia inspired a great deal of student interest. Many students, for example, were surprised to learn of the approximately two-and-a-half million Indian soldiers who fought in all theatres of the war, constituting the largest volunteer army in the history of humanity.[7] These lectures and, more importantly, sustained student interest furthered our commitment to this topic.

Subsequent conversations led us to pay more attention to the Second World War not only in our teaching but also in our own ongoing research projects. This was surprisingly easy to do because once we became conscious of it, the Second World War appeared everywhere in our sources. Yet, it also became clear to us that if our goal was not only to reconstruct wartime events, but to also consider the war's long-term influence, then we would need to begin a collaborative project. This was made possible by a growing range of exciting new and forthcoming scholarship that addressed wartime India in global contexts, including work that better attends to the connections between the United States and British India and between South and Southeast Asia.[8] Hoping to further that conversation and initiate a collaborative project, we organized (along with one of the issues contributors, Rotem Geva) a pre-conference (now symposium) for the Annual Conference on South Asia at Madison about the Second World War that brought together 15, mostly early career, scholars. This dynamic, interdisciplinary conversation both resulted in the special issue published here and contributed to ongoing projects in a variety of fields, including the histories of technology and

'Starvation amidst Plenty: The Making of Famine in Bengal, Honan, and Tonkin, 1942–45', *Modern Asian Studies* 24:4 (1994); Madhusree Mukerjee, *Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India during World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2010); Janam Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal: War, Famine and the End of Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Sourit Bhattacharya, 'The Question of Literary Form: Realism in the Poetry and Theater of the 1943 Bengal Famine', in *The Aesthetics and Politics of Global Hunger*, (eds) Anastasia Ulanowicz and Manisha Basu (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); and Benjamin Siegel, *Hungry Nation: Food, Famine, and the Making of Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). In turn, Abhijit Sarkar recently addressed how famine relief became a crucial tool for political mobilization in wartime Bengal. See Abhijit Sarkar, 'Fed by Famine: The Hindu Mahasabha's Politics of Religion, Caste, and Relief in Response to the Great Bengal Famine, 1943–1944', *Modern Asian Studies* 54:6 (2020), pp. 2023–2029.

[7]See Raghavan, *India's War*.

[8]For example, see Kalyani Ramnath, *Boats in a Storm: Law, Migration, and Decolonization in South and Southeast Asia, 1942–1962* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023); and Benjamin Seigel, 'Beneficent Destinations: Global Pharmaceuticals and the Consolidation of the Modern Indian Opium Regime, 1907–2016', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 57:3 (2020), pp. 327–362.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X2300015X Published online by Cambridge University Press

medicine, literary studies, scholarship on legal regimes, histories of the Indian Ocean world, and gender studies.

This special issue focuses on three topics, which make up its three sections. The first section deals with the implications of a global war in India, paying special attention to how South Asians both experienced and conceptualized the connections between regional and global developments during the war. A second section focuses on language and literature, namely Hindi and Bengali, and a third and final section turns to media, specifically cinema and radio, inviting us to consider how the war was seen and heard in South Asia.

The global war in South Asia

In the opening article of the special issue, Rotem Geva analyses 'how nationalist Indians made sense of the war's political and moral causes and goals, and how such understandings shaped the war's longer historical resonance' in the region.[9] Through her analysis of wartime journalism and nonfiction writing, she demonstrates the significance of these often-overlooked genres for understanding how the war was experienced, assessed, and later memorialized in South Asia. Focusing on the work of the *Bombay Chronicle* journalist and nonfiction writer Dosabhai Framji Karaka, Geva illuminates the dilemma faced by nationalist Indians, as the war pitted their struggle for independence against the global struggle against fascism. By considering events in India against the backdrop of the unfolding of the war, she suggests that this dilemma reached its height in 1942—a crucial year in the war's history, whose urgency made the contradictions between Britain's imperial and liberal commitments most visible. The unprecedented pressure posed by 1942 forced nationalist Indians to make a difficult choice between the struggle against colonialism and the war on fascism, a dilemma understood by contemporaries 'as a choice between nationalism and internationalism'.[10] Karaka, who saw the global war as a struggle for humanity that should take precedence over India's immediate independence, was an exception among Congress supporters. His colleagues at the *Bombay Chronicle*, Khwaja Ahmad (K. A.) Abbas and Narayan Gopal Jog, whose works Geva also analyses, represented the general trend in prioritizing liberation from colonial rule.

Also bridging the regional and the global, Aditya Balasubramanian tells the history of the wartime famine in the princely state of Travancore (now in the southern Indian state of Kerala) to address the importance of regional trajectories in India's wartime experience and the role of an often-overlooked wartime famine in the making of Kerala's progressive politics. Balasubramanian argues that the devastating scale of the much larger famine in Bengal—and its important place in both contemporary media coverage and subsequent scholarship—inadvertently obscured severe food shortages in other parts of the subcontinent during the Second World War. More broadly, his article addresses how global economic and agricultural ties informed local histories of food and hunger in wartime India. In the case of Travancore, the princely state's reliance on Burma for rice imports and its integration into the world economy as a

[9]Rotem Geva, 'Torn Between the Nation and the World: D. F. Karaka and Indian Journalism in the Second World War' in this special issue.

[10]Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X2300015X Published online by Cambridge University Press

cash crop economy meant that Travancore suffered tremendously through wartime disruptions in shipping.

More broadly, Balasubramanian's article makes the case for different regional scales of analysis—or what he terms the 'princely unit of analysis'—for studying the Second World War's influence on South Asia. While many princely states retrospectively appear quite brittle by the 1940s, Balasubramanian's study of Travancore suggests that some princely states were powerful political and economic actors in ways that have not been fully addressed, especially in terms of histories of industrialization, agricultural development, and food production. This article demonstrates that it is impossible to understand Kerala's post-colonial progressive politics—and the important role of the Communist Party in Kerala—without attending to the local and global history of the wartime famine.

Language and literature

Two articles in this special focus on literary cultures. Gregory Goulding turns to Hindi-language travel literature and Ahona Panda to Bengali texts about the Bengal Famine. In his article, Goulding demonstrates that the Second World War is an often forgotten, if crucial, moment in the making of a national literary imaginary for the Hindi language. Specifically, wartime logistics, troop movements, and expanding transportation infrastructure were crucial for conceptualizing the space of India for Hindi and of Hindi for India. Specifically, through a study of the wartime travelogue of the Hindi poet and novelist S. H. Vatsyayan 'Agyeya', Goulding argues that the Second World War shaped the conceptualization of the space of India for some influential Hindi writers and intellectuals. Agyeya, a former revolutionary who served in the British Indian Army, penned a travel account of his wartime journeys across British India. Goulding's careful reading of Agyeya's travelogue reveals that wartime logistical and material infrastructure created productive tensions for the conceptualization of India. In turn, the war was crucial for the imaginative and literary work of border-making in British India's Northeast and Northwest. Ultimately, the war became, to paraphrase Goulding, an 'insistent pretext'.[11] Goulding also attends to the occlusions of a Hindi account of the Second World War in regions distant from the language's North Indian heartland. In summary, Goulding's case study suggests how the Second World War was an important, if often unacknowledged, event in the archives of Indian writers and intellectuals.

A vast corpus of scholarly works has tackled the causes of the wartime famine in Bengal. Drawing on this work, but taking a different approach, Panda analyses the Bengali literary sphere's response to the devastating famine. She demonstrates that during and after the Bengal Famine, left-leaning Bengali intellectuals, almost always upper class and/or from privileged caste backgrounds, had to grapple with their own social and cultural privilege in unprecedented ways. Through an analysis of the Anti-Fascist Writers' and Artists' Association's publications, she shows how the Bengal Famine was 'a moment of moral collapse that implicated both imperial centres of power and the local colonial bourgeois class'.

[11]Gregory Goulding, 'A Tale of a Tyre: National Space, Infrastructure, and Narration in S. H. Vatsyayan's "Parśurām se tūrxam"' in this special issue.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X2300015X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Panda makes two interrelated arguments. First, she argues that the Bengali intelligentsia poignantly felt that the global war made 'the provincial Bengali sitting at home into an actor of world history'. Now, 'ordinary people found themselves imbricated in global processes, including worldwide curfews, air raids, blackouts, and, ultimately, an unacknowledged genocide'. This realization, Panda shows, was by no means a happy one, especially since it revealed the contradictions in the 'promises of Enlightenment and the fraught universality of literature itself'. Second, through an examination of mostly unstudied Bengali Famine narrative fiction, she demonstrates that these works never tried to understand what the peasants who perished (or survived) the famine actually experienced. Instead, these caste- and class-privileged writers turned inwards, focusing on their own predicament. Ironically, by foregrounding *bhadralok* subjectivity in the production of famine literature, prominent Bengali authors 'furthered the idea of peasant passivity', a trope, Panda argues, that many authors still have not quite escaped.

Media and technology studies

As the media anthropologist William Mazzarella notes, the British Government of India during the Second World War faced 'the greatest marketing challenge of all: how to convince a mass of people who no longer accept your sovereignty to lay down their lives for you'.[12] Debashree Mukherjee and Huacuja Alonso grapple with this peculiar 'marketing challenge' as they track some of the colonial government's efforts to mobilize film and radio (respectively) to meet this challenge and analyse local populations' varied responses to these efforts.

Mukherjee shows that the British Government of India, deeply aware of the power of cinema and eager to use it to persuade Indians to support the war effort, tried to capitalize on existing film networks and industry. She shows that from 1940 and 1945, the British Government of India tried several strategies to incorporate film into their propaganda, but 'a series of failed experiments saw the colonial government steadily adopting coercion as their chief strategy with regard to film propaganda, rather than collaboration'. Towards the end of the war, the government ultimately chose the 'full-length fiction film as the main mode of war propaganda in India'.[13] This strategy, however, mostly failed, at least from a British colonial perspective, because filmmakers produced half-hearted content and managed to sneak anticolonial messages and sometimes even pro-Japanese messages into their work. For example, colonial officers first lauded the film *Burma Rani* for its anti-Japanese portrayal, but later worried that it contained a hidden anticolonial message because Indian Army officers portrayed in the film were driven not by loyalty to the British Army, but by Indian patriotism. Mukherjee concludes that the British 'fantasy of collaborating with competent and successful local filmmakers to produce culturally appropriate fare that would win

[12]W. Mazzarella, 'A Torn Performative Dispensation: The Affective Politics of British Second World War Propaganda in India and the Problem of Legitimation in an Age of Mass Publics', *South Asian History and Culture* 1:1 (2010), pp. 1–24. Cited in Debashree Mukherjee, 'Media Wars: Remaking the Logics of Propaganda in India's Wartime Cine-Ecologies' in this special issue.

[13]Mukherjee, 'Media Wars' in this special issue.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X2300015X Published online by Cambridge University Press

the hearts and minds of India's war-indifferent masses ultimately proved to be just that—wishful thinking'.[14]

Tuning to another medium, Huacuja Alonso analyses two radically different wartime radio stations: Radio SEAC, a wide-reaching military radio station based in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) for British troops stationed in Asia, and Congress Radio, an underground makeshift station in Bombay operated by young anticolonial activists that first went on the air during Quit India. Analysing these two radio stations together, she shows how the Second World War shaped technological infrastructures, but also refashioned how radio broadcasters, whether anticolonial activists or colonial administrators, engaged audiences. Both Radio SEAC administrators and Congress Radio broadcasters were less concerned with the content of the broadcasts than with projecting an aura of technological grandeur and generating discussions about radio technology.

Specifically, Huacuja Alonso recovers the making of what she terms an '(anti)colonial sublime' on the airwaves. Refashioning Brian Larkin's 'colonial sublime'—or the deployment of 'technology to represent an overwhelming sense of grandeur'—Huacuja Alonso proposes the development of an '(anti)colonial sublime'.[15] In her telling, the '(anti)colonial sublime' of static-filled broadcasts, malfunctioning transmitters, and clandestine technology in wartime India constitutes an invitation to reconsider how radio technology connects with audiences. For example, young Congress activists in Bombay embraced the static and unclear reception of their makeshift station, thereby fashioning a rebellious soundscape of technological glitches to challenge the British empire's claim to technological prowess. In summary, reading the histories of these two very different stations together, Huacuja Alonso argues that wartime experiments with radio, on vastly different scales, laid the foundation for the enduring rivalry between commercial and state radio broadcasters that characterized post-colonial South Asia.

Connective threads

There are important connective threads across the six articles. Most obviously, each article invites us to reconsider the trajectory of the war 'beyond battles and between theatres', presenting an expansive understanding of the war that includes its cultural, social, and political ramifications in South Asia. In this way the special issue demonstrates that an account of the war's global trajectory must include places such as Travancore and Bombay, alongside Delhi, Calcutta, and Bengal's countryside—where its effects were deeply felt.

The articles also contribute to wider scholarly efforts to study the 1940s in South Asia beyond the national frameworks that have retrospectively been applied to the period. As both Geva and Huacuja Alonso demonstrate, the 1942 Quit India movement was not only an important moment in the anticolonial struggle, but also very much a 'Second World War moment', directly connected to the trajectory of the global war.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Isabel Huacuja Alonso, 'Broadcasting the "(Anti)colonial Sublime": Radio SEAC, Congress Radio, and the Second World War in South Asia' in this special issue.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X2300015X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Moreover, a significant methodological concern across the six articles is the different scales of analysis that the study of South Asia during the Second World War, and of the Second World War from the perspective of South Asia, can offer. The war provides scholars of South Asia with an opportunity for innovative comparative work, whether in the case of radio technologies deployed during the war or in terms of the different scale (and diverging long-term impact) of famines in different parts of the Indian subcontinent. In turn, the authors in the special issue address how South Asians themselves used the global war to evaluate the ethical implications of local and global political developments.

While the authors employed a wide range of source materials and archives, what sets this special issue apart is its efforts to bridge the colonial archive of the war in India with alternative, non-state archives. In this vein, many of the authors in the special issue use vernacular archives to rethink the war in South Asia and to consider the still-understudied impact of the war on South Asian languages. For Hindi novelists, Bengali playwrights, wartime journalists, filmmakers, and ordinary student activists turned radio broadcasters, the Second World War radically reconfigured the politics of language and media production in India. One important conclusion is that mid-twentieth century literary developments in South Asian languages were as shaped by the Second World War as they were by the anticolonial movement, independence, and partition, whose multifaceted effects have been studied in much more depth. The pivotal role of technologies is another important recurring theme across this special issue. Whether in a wartime Hindi travelogue narrated by the tyre of a military truck or British attempts to use radio and cinema technology to meet the impossible 'marketing challenge' that Mazzarella describes, the war left an array of technological legacies in the Indian subcontinent.[16] As Goulding notes in his article, 'This is a war … of technology—of carburretors and dynamos, of permits and deadlines.'[17]

The special issue articles also draw attention to the circulation of pro-Axis attachments, and even sympathy for fascism in the 1940s in India. As Mukherjee and Huacuja Alonso note, attention to the media 'ecologies' during the war years makes this evident.[18] Shortwave stations broadcasting from Germany and Japan in Indian languages filled the airwaves and drew significant interest from Indian listeners.[19] Feature films, like *Burma Rani*, could also display pro-Japanese sentiments that escaped the British censors, but were clear to Indian viewers. K. A. Abbas, a journalist, filmmaker, and briefly also a radio newsreader, who features in Geva's, Mukherjee's, and Huacuja Alonso's articles, was keenly aware of the ways pro-fascist sentiments circulated at this time. When recalling his experiences during Quit India and in particular commenting on how many of his friends and colleagues held pro-Axis views, Abbas explained: 'this was the peculiarity of the national movement—that there was dialogue, and even

[16]Mazzarella, 'A Torn Performative Dispensation', p. 1.

[17]Goulding, 'A Tale of a Tyre' in this special issue.

[18]We are referencing Mukherjee's use of cine-ecology here. Debrashree Mukherjee, *Bombay Hustle: Making Movies in a Colonial City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

[19]See also Isabel Huacuja Alonso, *Radio for the Millions: Hindu-Urdu Broadcasting Across Borders* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023), Chapter 1.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X2300015X Published online by Cambridge University Press

co-operation, between people holding different points of views, which were so sharply divided at that critical moment'.[20]

Lastly, as mentioned earlier, this special issue has important ties to our teaching. A desire to challenge the Eurocentric retellings of the war in world history survey classes initially inspired this special issue. We therefore hope that it will prove useful in the classroom for both undergraduate and graduate students at a wide range of universities. We anticipate that the articles featured could help instructors design and teach global history courses that decentre Europe and North America, as well as South Asian studies courses that emphasize the region's pivotal place in global developments.

As is the case with many special issues, ours does not address every region of South Asia or every language adequately or take up many important themes. In particular, we hope to see more research on the war in the Northeast, connections between Burma (now Myanmar) and wartime India, and the United States' growing involvement in South Asia. We also hope that the issue will lead to more studies on the war's influence on other South Asian literary traditions and on the profound ways in which the war shaped gendered expectations in South Asian societies. If the hope of this special issue is to put to rest the idea of the war as 'mood music' forever, it is also a call for more scholarship on the Second World War in South Asia.

Competing interests. None.

[20]K. A. Abbas, Oral Interview, 123b, Centre of South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge, Oral History Collection (CCAS, OHC).

Cite this article: Huacuja Alonso, Isabel and Andrew Amstutz. 2023. 'Rethinking the Second World War in South Asia: Between theatres and beyond battles'. *Modern Asian Studies* 57(5), pp. 1449–1458. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X2300015X