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## Cinematograph Films and the Home Office

RECENT correspondence in the *Manchester Guardian* has directed public attention to a grave risk threatening that general use of cinematograph films in education and research, which has made such rapid and desirable progress in recent years. For it is admitted that the Home Office proposes to bring the smaller sorts of cinematograph projectors, and the films on cellulose acetate base which are commonly supplied for use with them, within the scope of new regulations purporting to be made under authority of the Cinematograph Act 1909 in the interest—so it is alleged—of greater safety for the public.

Now the Cinematograph Act is concerned solely with the use of apparatus "for the purposes of which inflammable films are used": it gives no authority whatever "for securing safety" in the use of any film which is not inflammable. When the Act was passed, in November 1909, scarcely any projectors were in use except those for films of 'standard' 35 mm. width; and scarcely any films were published except on 'cellulose nitrate' base, which is highly inflammable, igniting at about 230° C., and burning with almost explosive violence. It was clearly in the public interest that the use of such a substance in public assemblies and in necessary proximity to an arc-lamp should be strictly regulated.

In 1909, however, this defect of the earlier films was already leading to the provision of a substitute, the 'cellulose acetate' base, which does not inflame at all below a red heat, melts before it ignites, smoulders rather than burns, and often extinguishes itself. The Cinematograph Act accordingly dealt only with projectors using 'inflammable' films. But the 'non-flam' base has even now one serious disadvantage, that it is liable to warp in use, and consequently is not suitable for films so wide as the 'standard' 35 mm. gauge.

For all 'sub-standard' widths down to 9 mm., and consequently for cheap and portable projectors, adequate for school classes and other small audiences, as well as for laboratory work and private entertainment, the 'non-flam' film has revolutionised cinematography, as the Kodak camera with its roll-holder of film negatives revolutionised photography forty years ago. Schools of all grades, laboratories and museums, clubs and churches, have been equipped with

sub-standard projectors; thousands of film exhibitions are given annually with the same freedom as lantern lectures; and many lantern slides, too, are now made on 'non-flam' base, which is both lighter and less fragile than glass. For Kodak negatives the 'non-flam' film has practically driven out the earlier bases, some of which were dangerously inflammable. No accident from a public exhibition of 'non-flam' film has ever been reported: a solitary mishap at Dulwich College was shown to have resulted from the inadvertent issue of an inflammable film from a Government department. The Post Office has now its own film factory and issues 'non-flam' films for public use. The Board of Education allows large sums to be spent to install 'sub-standard' projectors for open use in schools.

The Cinematograph Act, however, did not define an 'inflammable' film; and the Home Office, after leaving sub-standard projectors, with their 'acetate'-base films, unmolested for nearly twenty-five years, has now admitted, under question, that it is intended to "adapt the regulations to present conditions" and that "one of the points to be dealt with is the relaxation, in favour of slow-burning films, of certain requirements necessary for fast-burning films". The implication here is that all films are "inflammable" within the terms of the Cinematograph Act, and that unless and until the Home Office "relaxes" its regulations, any film exhibition is liable to be regarded as a breach of the Act, unless it takes place under the very stringent regulations proper for 'standard' size films on 'nitrate' base.

It is difficult at first sight to believe that there is anyone who wishes to restrict the free use of sub-standard projectors or the general employment of films in private, in education and research, or in places of entertainment other than those larger halls where 'standard' projectors, and (consequently) inflammable films are still indispensable. But the premature glee with which certain newspapers have proclaimed the end of the 'non-flam myth' seems to betray such a desire; and it is obvious that if people can see the kinds of films they desire, co-operatively, safely and at small cost, without 'going to the pictures', it is not very good for interests which at one time had almost a monopoly of the cinema; as professional photographers monopolised photographs and lantern-slides before the days of the Kodak.

It is especially unfortunate, also, that this

outrery about 'non-flam' films should have been confused in some minds with the quite different question whether private, social and educational exhibitions should be 'censored' or otherwise controlled in the supposed interests of morality, political orthodoxy, or what are popularly described as 'box-office' considerations. For, whereas 'non-flam' films and sub-standard projectors have until now been free from official interference on the ground of public safety, most authorities responsible for licensing halls for the exhibition of 'standard' and therefore 'inflammable' films, though legally concerned only with the personal safety of audiences, have in fact agreed to permit in their areas only films 'approved' by the British Board of Film Censors, a body which was set up by the film trade itself, shortly after the Cinematograph Act was passed.

This confusion of public safety with public morality has been the weakest point in British film administration throughout. If the public needs protection against improper or subversive films, it would seem reasonable that this should be assured under the laws regulating improper or subversive behaviour in general. If a censorship should be deemed unavoidable, let us have an official censor, responsible to one of the Secretaries of State, not to the 'trade', which has an interest in the matter, and not always a British interest.

Further, if "for securing safety" the Home Office wishes to "adapt the regulations to present conditions", it can make sub-standard projectors as safe and foolproof as their recognised public utility demands, simply by making it an offence, under the Cinematograph Act or otherwise, to manufacture or offer for sale films on 'nitrate'-base of any width less than the standard 35 mm. size. Any restriction or discouragement of the present general use of the sub-standard projector would be a disaster in public education, and also in the many branches of scientific research and teaching in which this valuable piece of apparatus is employed.

#### The National Institute of Sciences of India

**F**URTHER details of the Indian Institute of Sciences, to which brief reference was made in NATURE of January 12 (p. 59), are now available. Elsewhere in this issue (p. 441) we print an article summarising the circumstances of its inception and recording the proceedings of the inaugural meeting. The desirability of having in India a national academy has long