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Probing, Painterly Films Bring The Raj Back to Life

The scene: It is early evening puja at a bucolic Kali temple in North India - 1942. Two high-toned bells are rhythmically resounding as a little Hindu girl wearing a marigold garland airily waves her hands towards herself in time to the bells, seeming to draw in the spiritual power of the temple. The camera recedes past a small black granite Nandi, cuts to Lord Ganesha in a wall niche and rests on two brahmin priests wrapped in rudraksha beads, one old, one young, preparing arathi for Kali, seen in the background. From amid the village devotees appear a hesitant young Englishwoman escorted by a Britain-bred Indian in his mid-twenties (she had asked to see a puja). After tapping the shrine bell, they stand before Kali as the camphor flame flickers across Her horrific features. The flame is passed to them a bright red vermillion mark neatly dabbed in between the eyebrows and the 2 are garlanded. There is a lingering moment as the woman stares into the eyes of Kali, trying to fathom the deity's imagery and presence.

That is a diamond sparkling scene out of Jewel in the Crown, one of a veritable bevy of British-produced films set in pre-Independence India that are artistically outshining everything being shown today on screen and television.

The "India" phenomena began with the hugely successful Gandhi in 1982. since then a half-dozen film crews and casts have been trekking India's painterly panorama from Srinigar to Mysore recreating colonial India.

When Gandhi was criticized in India for leaving out freedom-fighter Subhas Chandra Bose, London's Granada Television filmed a portrait of Bose, Springing Tiger. When Tiger came under fire, again in India, Granada TV undaunted, filmed the 15-hour television drama, Jewel in the Crown, which recently kept the entire British population glued to their tellies for 14 straight Tuesdays. It is now showing on American television and is soon airing in China. Poignantly, it is not being shown in India.

Simultaneously, The Far Pavilions (for American Cable TV) and the exquisitely crafted A Passage to India, which is now aweing American audiences, were filmed. Currently, Rudyard Kipling's "Kim" and Mountbatten: The Last Viceroy are in Production.

Jewel, Passage, and Pavilions are adapted from Western-authored novels. For Hindus, Pavillions has the most arresting story line: an Englishman is raised in India from boyhood by a Hindu woman and entangles himself with a Rajput princess. Unfortunately, it is incurably flawed by the casting of a popular American actress as the princess. A similar flaw slightly cracks the otherwise beautiful texture of Passage with Alec Guinness affecting the garb, manner and speech of the Hindu pandit, Professor Gaudbol.

Jewel and Passage mirror each other in that their story's epicenter is about an aristocratic young Englishman enamored of India's people and culture. In both stories the woman is allegedly raped by Indian man. For Paul Scott, author of the "Raj Quartet," from which Jewel is adapted, the rape is a microcosmic allegory for the British Raj's (term for the British rule of India) cultural, social and economic plundering of India.

For the British, who for the past 40 years since their Raj finally crumbled have been karmically pummelled by economic and social downturns, these films are nostalgic voyages into the worldly glory of their Empire. More deeply they are self-reflections on the metalrigid British caste system as it interrelated with India's

For Americans, these portrayals touch no historic nerve; it is the sheer magnitude, magic and mystic of India that rivets them.

For Hindus, if they look underneath the British overlay that perpetually colors these films, there are enjoyable, sometimes delightful vignettes of Hinduism's subtle customs, mannerisms and intuitions. With few exceptions, the stationed-in-India British characters with all their upper crust civility come across as arrogant barbarians when juxtaposed with the refined, deftly poised culture of the Hindus surrounding them.

In one amusing Jewel scene, an elderly pandit, who is an underground leader in Gandhi's independence movement, swiftly whittles to sawdust an implied threat from a high-ranking British political officer be employing Hindu philosophical logic.

Lord Siva is a kind ambient presence in Jewel, seen on posters in the background, mentioned in conversation. Ironically, a Christian nun keeps a Siva Nataraja in her mission and offers a nice explanation of Him when a visiting Englishwoman asks. She is drawn to Siva, feeling a vivid sense of enveloping security in His image, though she wrongly identifies His whirling hair as wings. And, perhaps as an intended allusion to karma, the central character in Jewel, a male violent young British officer who falsely accuses, tortures and imprisons and innocent Indian man, ends up disfigured and armless after being wounded at the Burmese front.

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