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Fritz Lang's Indian Epic (Diptych): *The Tiger of Eschnapur* and *The Indian Tomb* 1959

Fritz Lang (1890-1976)

OVERVIEW

A fever dream.
—Fritz Lang on Thea von Harbou's novel *The Indian Tomb*[1]

In his four-decade career, Fritz Lang directed films in three languages and in four countries: Germany, France, USA—and India. Together referred to as Fritz Lang's Indian Epic, *The Tiger of Eschnapur* and *The Indian Tomb* were two installments of what was conceived as a trilogy (hereafter referred to as the Indian Epic). In Western Germany, the two films were released consecutively in January and March of 1959. The United States distributor edited—or "mutilated", as Lang recalled[2]—the diptych into a single and much shorter film titled *Journey to the Lost City* for its 1960 release.

Source and Versions. The Indian Epic revolves around a German architect who is hired by a Maharaja to build a complex of schools and hospitals in his kingdom. Things get complicated with the involvement of a temple dancer (i.e. a **devadasi**) and eventually an ominous tomb becomes the centerpiece of the architectural project. The films are introduced with the title card "from an idea by Thea von Harbou". Von Harbou's 1918 novel *Das Indische Grabmal* had formed the basis of a two part film (*The Mission of the Yogi* and *The Tiger of Bengal*) directed by Joe May. Lang and his then wife von Harbou were originally attached to helm the project, but it was snatched from them by May.[3] During the Nazi era, a remake by Richard Eichberg was released in 1938. Interestingly, Lang's opening credits acknowledge "an original idea by Thea von Harbou"—and even more curiously, salute Eichberg's 1938 films with a title card as a "welterfolg—the world success".

Lang in Germany. Lang directed the Indian films after his frustrating exit from Hollywood with 1956's *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*. For a while he pondered directing *Pearl of Love*—the unrealized love story revolving around the construction of Taj Mahal.[4] Then he met producer Artur Brauner, who was interested in translating "the exoticist adventure serials of the Weimar period into the new context of Franco-German co-productions".[5] Lang accepted his offer to revisit the Indian story, as well as 'resurrecting' the master villain Dr. Mabuse from 1921 and 1933—"It sounded to me like a circle was beginning to close—a kind of fate" he recalled.[6] Lang went to Western Germany to direct the last three films of his career, with the Indian Epic followed by *The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse* in 1960.

Location. The films were shot in three months and twenty-seven days of shooting took place in India[7]; in the city of Udaipur in Rajasthan. Lang was welcomed as a state guest.[8] The opening credits express gratitude to Bhagwat Singh of Mewar for his hospitality and opening his island palace to the crew. The Indian ruler's island palaces Lake Palace (Jag Niwas) and Lake Garden Palace (Jag Mandir) would be later featured in the 1984 James Bond film *Octopussy* starring Roger Moore.

Cast and Creative Team. An American actress, Debra Paget, is cast as the "Sheeva dancer". In both films, she performs her dance before a gigantic statue of Sheeva—whose sitting pose remotely recalls Hindu deity Shiva the Destroyer (Mahadeva) but is otherwise considerably different. Paget (very young costar of *Broken Arrow* [1950] with James Stewart and cast member of the Oscar-winner *The Ten Commandments* [1956]) had played a similar role in 1954's *Princess of the Nile* (1954, Harmon Jones).

The leading man is a Swiss actor; Paul Hubschmid plays the German architect who is a prototype of later decades' action heroes, notably "Indiana" Jones who would make his debut in 1981's *Raiders of the Lost*

Ark. Hubschmid's acting career blossomed in the Nazi era, continued in Hollywood and post-war Germany with films such as the cult science fiction *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953), in *Hungarian Rhapsody*—as Franz Liszt (1954), and the Len Deighton adaptation *Funeral in Berlin* (1966). Lang's compatriot Walther Reyer plays the Western educated and obsessively cruel Maharaja Chandra.

The Indian Epic is one of the early appearances of Luciana Paluzzi—upcoming star of Italian genre cinema (and Bond Girl in 1965's *Thunderball*)—in a secondary part playing the handmaiden of the temple dancer. In a related note, the vibrant and dazzling colors of Fritz Lang's Indian films and their lavish set decor anticipate the aesthetics of the giallo films of Mario Bava and other Italian directors. The elaborate costumes are designed by Günther Brosda for Debra Paget and by Claudia Herborg for the Maharaja and rest of the cast—mostly European actors in make-up playing Indian roles. Cinematographer Richard Angst had contributed to German "mountain films" such as *The White Hell of Pitz Palu* (1929) starring Nazi propagandist Leni Riefenstahl.

Themes. The Indian diptych is among Lang's less viewed and appreciated films. It was held in high regard by filmmakers of the French New Wave. The critic Lotte Eisner explained that their "extreme admiration" was a result of "the formal perfection, the masterly use of décor and spatial structuring."[9]

While the ambitious blockbuster epics of the 1950s were often shot in widescreen, the Indian epic was shot in a regular format, which doesn't accentuate the grandiose aspects of the story. On the other hand, the truncated edges make it ideal for television. Accordingly,

> Lang's version has become something of a cultural icon in the German-speaking world over time, comparable to films like *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) and *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) in America that wove their thread into the fabric of national culture mainly through holiday television screenings.[10]

The Indian films are spectacular fantasies, at times recalling *Die Nibelungen* and *Metropolis*. They are relevant to discussions of post-World War II issues such as post-colonization, Westernization, race, class, patriarchy and gender. Particularly interesting for contemporary viewers in the early 2020s is their public health subtext: a seemingly disease-free city is in fact a result of banishing the sick to the catacombs—whose leper colonies nod to horror genre and its zombies.

CHARACTERS

Seetha the Sheeva Dancer. Seetha is a temple dancer who travels to te Maharaja's palace to perform. On the way, she meets and falls in love with Harald Berger. Maharaja Chandra is infatuated with her and their subsequent marriage leads to a deadly love triangle and court intrigues.
Harald Berger. The German architect is commissioned by Chandra to build civic buildings.
Maharaja Chandra. The Maharaja is introduced as a benevolent despot who is focused on building modern infrastructure in his kingdom. Soon, his darker side is revealed; diabolically jealous of Seetha, he demands the construction of a tomb for her.
Dr. Rhode and Irene Rhode. Harold Berger's associate (and his brother-in-law) is the second architect in the project and is told by Chandra to design the tomb. His wife Irene (Berger's sister) helps the captives escape from Chandra's dungeons.
Bharani. Seetha's servant and confidant is a victim of the court intrigues. Bharani is played by 1960s and 1970s star of Italian genre cinema (and Bond girl of 1965's *Thunderball*) Luciana Paluzzi.
Prince Ramigani. Chandra's brother is the prime mover of the attempted coup.
Yama. A fiendish high-priest and reactionary zealot, who is one of the key players in the power struggle—played by Russian-French actor Inkijinoff.
Padhu. The courtier is the brother of Chandra's previous wife, the late Maharani. He is another reactionary and a leading figure in the attempted palace coup.
Asigara. The Paris and Vienna trained Indian architect is assigned as an assistant to Berger and Rhode; he is cordial and good-intentioned; despite his loyalty to the Maharaja, his support to the Rhodes proves critical and he loses his life to save the Europeans.

General Dagh. Loyalist senior commander plays a key role in suppressing the coup and restoring the status quo.

SYNOPSIS

The Tiger of Eschnapur

German architect Harold Berger and his partner Dr. Rhode are commissioned by Maharaja Chandra to construct a civil complex in his kingdom. On his way to the palace, Berger meets Seetha the Dancer and accompanies her to the palace. She soon moves the palace and spends her days in her gold plated room with her confidant Bharani. A conspiracy is brewing at the palace, where his top advisors, led by his brother Ramigani, are holding secret meetings. Meanwhile Chandra's brother, Yama the high-priest and the warlord Padhu are disgruntled and conspire. During a royal hunting party, Padhu orchestrates the abduction of Seetha. Maharaja promptly rescues her and publicly humiliates his former brother-in-law, who leaves the citadel with his troops.

Maharaja gets enraged when Yama fuels his jealousy by reporting Seetha's rendezvous with Berger. The architect gets entrapped in the pit of tigers, but manages to survive by killing the attacking beast. He is told to leave the kingdom, which he does, but not without taking Seetha with him; they ride into the desert, hoping to evade their pursuers. *The Tiger of Eschnapur* ends with the lovers desperately struggling under the burning sun and eventually collapsing on the sands, exhausted. The ending of the film shows Berger's architect associate Dr. Rhode and his wife (Berger's sister Irene) arriving at the palace.

The Indian Tomb

Berger and Seetha are saved by villagers, but are eventually captured by Prince Ramigani's men. Berger is thrown into a dungeon and Seetha is locked up in the palace. To the outrage of the priests, Maharaja Chandra announces that he is going to wed Seetha. Dr. Rhodes and Irene Rhodes begin to search for Berger and Seetha. Berger breaks free of his chains—the Indian diptych is considerably violent.

Padhu's men stage a coup. Concurrently, the loyalist army commander General Dagh is stabbed by Ramigani. As his treacherous brother seizes the throne, Maharaja Chandra is taken to the courtyard to endure a severe lashing. Underground, the Rhodes unite with Berger; at the palace, the wounded General Dagh recovers and leads his troops to crush the rebellion. Back in power, the Maharaja decides to live a life of humility and becomes the apprentice of the Yogi. Berger and Seetha happily leave the kingdom with a caravan.

SCENES

The Tiger of Eschnapur

A Caravanserai in India. Harald Berger and Dr. Rhode are German architects commissioned by Maharaja Chandra to construct a civil complex in his kingdom. Berger is travelling in advance to start working, to be joined by his associate who is wrapping up work in Calcutta. En route to the palace, he spends the night at a caravanserai where guests are terrified by a tiger roaming the countryside. As he is idling to pass time, Berger notices a few soldiers pestering a young woman and gets rid of them. Bharani happens to be the servant of Seetha the Sheeva Dancer—she is grateful to Berger and requests his company during the following day's journey.



The Maharaja. Next day, Berger and Seetha are greeted by a contingent of troops dispatched by the Maharaja to protect her during the rest of the journey. Soon enough, the dreaded tiger attacks and the guards disperse; the temple dancer is saved from the tiger by a flame-wielding Berger. Once they arrive at the palace, Chandra Maharaja gratefully thanks the architect for saving his guest—Seetha and her maid settle at a local inn and prepare for her upcoming performance. Meanwhile, the European-educated and cordial

Maharaja has the guard detachment brutally punished for their cowardice—The Maharaja is played by the Austrian actor Walther Reyer.



Questions of Identity. Berger and Seetha are enamored by each other. During a chit-chat, he raises the question of her ancestry. After some deliberation, Seetha explains what she knows about her mixed ethnicity and roots in Europe. The two end up singing an Irish folk song that she remembers from her childhood. Euro-star Luciana Paluzzi appears in an early supporting role as Seetha's handmaiden; the films' vibrant and dazzling colors anticipate Italian giallo films.





Tunnels Under the Palace. Berger is assigned an assistant—an Indian architect named Asigara, who was trained in Europe. They set out to work by surveying the vast network of tunnels underneath the island palace. One tunnel leads to a cave full of lepers condemned here; another one takes them to the temple where a ritual is in progress—with Seetha performing for the Maharaja and the priests. This is the temple of the Goddess Sheeva—who doesn't resemble Shiva the Destroyer. The dancer and the high-priest Yama somehow sense the foreigner's intrusion—fortunately Berger returns to his room before others spot him.



Gilded Cage. Maharaja Chandra is very impressed with Seetha's performance and asks her to move to his palace. Chandra's love for Seetha is unrequited; she obviously much rather remain the court dancer and continue flirting with Berger. She spends her days in her gold plated room with her confidant Bharani.

Chandra with Seetha the Temple Dancer (Debra Paget). The elaborate costumes are designed by Günther Brosda for Debra Paget and by Claudia Herborg for the Maharaja and rest of the cast; the films revolve around architecture—Berger and his associate Dr. Rhode are architects hired to build a civic complex.



Three Conspirators. Unbeknownst to Maharaja Chandra, a conspiracy is brewing at the palace, where his top advisors, led by his brother Ramigani, are holding secret meetings. Other prominent figures in the conspiracy are Yama the high-priest and the warlord Padhu, who is the disgruntled brother of Chandra's late wife. The three conspirators do not see eye to eye: Prince Ramigani schemes to facilitate his brother's marriage to Seetha, so that the Maharaja can be renounced and toppled for marrying a commoner; Padhu fears loss of status for himself with the crowning of a new Maharani; Yama is simply a zealot. During a royal hunting party, Padhu orchestrates the abduction of Seetha. Maharaja promptly rescues her and publicly humiliates his former brother-in-law, who leaves the citadel with his troops—the Maharaja's top advisors: his treacherous brother Ramigani, disgruntled former brother-in-law Padhu, and fanatical high-priest Yama—Russian-French actor Inkijinoff.



Murder at the Banquet. Weakened by losing a key ally, Ramigani continues to work behind the scenes. He encourages his brother to go ahead with his plan to marry Seetha—assuring him that she is also in love with him. When Chandra mentions that he would like to talk to Seetha's handmaiden, Ramigani realizes that this conversation would make his brother realize that his love is not mutual. He plots to eliminate Bharani and she gets killed by a fakir's supposedly magic trick during the banquet— the films' vibrant and dazzling colors anticipate Italian giallo films.



Into the Desert. Maharaja gets enraged when Yama fuels his jealousy by reporting Seetha's rendezvous with Berger. The architect gets entrapped in the pit of tigers, but manages to survive by killing the attacking beast. He is told to leave the kingdom, which he does, but not without taking Seetha with him; they ride into the desert, hoping to evade their pursuers. *The Tiger of Eschnapur* ends with the lovers desperately struggling under the burning sun and eventually collapsing on the sands, exhausted. The ending of the film shows Berger's architect associate Dr. Rhode and his wife (Berger's sister Irene) arriving at the palace.

The Indian Tomb

Safe Haven and Betrayal. Berger and Seetha are spotted by a caravan of traders, who take them to their villages. The villagers selflessly care for their guests, even after Maharaja Chandra's emissaries announce that sheltering the runaways would bring devastation and giving them away would be generously rewarded. Tempted by the offer of bounty, a villager snitches; the peasants warn the couple about the danger and tell them to resume their getaway. They take to the desert, but are eventually captured by Prince Ramigani's men.

Web of Deceit. Berger is thrown into a dungeon and Seetha is locked up in the palace. Ramigani blackmails her—with her inamorato's life—to coerce her to marry the Maharaja. The scheming Ramigani also coaxes his brother into believing that Seetha loves him.



The European Couple. Irene Rhode is informed that her brother has perished during a tiger hunt; Dr. Rhode is told to carry on working on the architectural project. To his horror, he is instructed by the Maharaja to design a tomb—evidently for the not yet dead Seetha. Convinced that the Maharaja is lying, they carry on searching for Berger. They seek the support of the gentle Asigara, a European-trained architect, who is torn between his goodwill and loyalty to the Maharaja. (The island palace was later used as a location for the James Bond film *Octopussy*).

Hatching a Coup. The confused Maharaja consults an eminent yogi, while his top advisors plot to overthrow him. The conniving Padhu returns to the city and keeps his troops on standby for the coup.

Trial and Marriage. The priests insist that as a follower of Sheeva, Seetha should be tried at the temple. Even though the Maharaja senses that the verdict would doom Seetha, he succumbs to the demands of Yama. During the divine trial, Seetha once again mesmerizes the Maharaja with her risqué dance before a deadly cobra—he intervenes and kills the snake before it can bite her. To the outrage of the priests, Maharaja Chandra announces that he is going to wed Seetha.

Plans and a Plan. After carefully studying plans of the palace, Irene Rhodes manages to locate and contact Seetha where she is held captive. Subsequently, she gathers that Berger is kept in a dungeon nearby. Further scrutiny of the labyrinth-like caverns propels Dr. Rhodes to devise a desperate plan to blow them up with dynamite to save his brother-in-law.



Breakthrough. With the wedding approaching, Ramigani observes that his captive has outlived his usefulness for blackmailing the temple dancer and has become a liability. The executioner he sends to the dungeon is overpowered by Berger, who breaks free of his chains—the Indian diptych is considerably violent.

Coup at the Wedding. While the Rhodes are scavenging the underground tunnels to find Berger, malcontent nobles and priests gather at the palace for the royal wedding. As planned, Padhu's men sneak attack the palace guard. Concurrently, the loyalist army

commander General Dagh is stabbed by Ramigani. As his treacherous brother seizes the throne, Maharaja Chandra is taken to the courtyard to endure a severe lashing.

Countercoup and Serenity. Underground, the Rhodes unite with Berger; at the palace, the wounded General Dagh recovers and leads his troops to crush the rebellion. Back in power, the Maharaja decides to live a life of humility and becomes the apprentice of the Yogi. Berger and Seetha happily leave the kingdom with a caravan.



Architect Berger is not only a prototype of Indiana Jones, he also anticipates the first James Bond movie.



THEMES

Society – *Postcolonialism, Westernization, Gender Inequality,Class*

SOCIETY

Postcolonialism. The Indian Epic presumably takes place in mid to late 1800s. Then again, the films are a product of post-World War II context that was marked by decolonization. The coup and the subsequent counter-coup that take place would have many parallels in the international context of the post-war period.

Westernization. As the ruler of a non-European country, Maharaja Chandra is portrayed as an enlightened and benevolent despot. He has been educated in Europe and wants to introduce modern infrastructure to his country—the architects are hired to build a complex that includes schools and hospitals. Also, he is keen about his Western style army equipped with modern weapons. Feats of modernity such as modern architecture and infantry are contrasted with traditional forces. The reactionary figures who condemn modernization formulate it as Westernization. In this regard, Western educated elites—represented by the architect Asigari—are in a precarious position. Maharaja Chandra himself is targeted because for becoming Europeanized. On the other hand, the project of modernization does not extend to justice and democratic rule—Chandra is a dictator, unpredictable and cruel.

Gender Inequality. Yama the high-priest is a zealot, who opposes anything that could challenge the traditions of patriarchal rule. In his interactions with the masterful Yama, Chandra appears as a weak-willed ruler, who can be quite easily manipulated. As a socially and economically independent female artist, Seetha the Sheeva Dancer introduces a crisis. She is perceived by Yama as a threat to the established order; he nearly manages to get her killed—narrowly prevented by Chandra's personal intervention. Then again, the obsessively infatuated Chandra offers her a gilded cage—highlighted by the caged bird in her luxurious suite.

Class. Sheeva is a disruptive force, not only because she is a woman, but also because of her class. So much so that the conspirators use it as a pretext for a coup—i.e. the Maharaja marrying a temple dancer becomes a scandal in the offing. Interestingly, Sheeva is not only independent; she is also well-to-do enough to employ a personal servant. Her handmaiden Bharani belongs to a lower strata of society; an intrigue gets her murdered and her death is hardly an incident.

Discussion Question.

According to Tim Bergfelder, Lang's Indian diptych belongs to a group of films that represent "India as a site of escape from the constraints of national identity".[11] Do you agree?

[1] Bogdanovich, Peter. *Fritz Lang in America*. NY: Praeger. 1967, 111
[2] Ibid, 112
[3] Ibid, 140
[4] McGilligan, Patrick. *Fritz Lang, the Nature of the Beast.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2013, 422
[5] Bergfelder, Tim. International Adventures: Germna Popular Cinema and European Co-Productions in the 1960s. Oxford: Berghann. 2005, 119
[6] Bogdanovich, 111
[7] Ibid, 141
[8] McGilligan, 423
[9] Eisner, Lotte H. *Fritz Lang*. London: Secker & Warburg. 1976, 384
[10] Shedde, Meenakshi and Hediger, Vincenz. "Come On, Baby, Be My Tiger: Inventing India on the German Screen in Der Tiger von Eschnapur and Das indische Grabmal". *Rouge.* http://rouge.com.au/7/tiger.html. Uploaded 2005. Accessed March 2021. Original essay published M. Dutta, A. Fitz, M. Kröge, A. Schneider & D. Wenner (eds.), *Import/Export: Cultural Transfer between India and Germany*. Berlin: Parthas, 2005.
[11] Bergfelder, 122

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