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THE CHESS PLAYERS (1977)

Director	Satyajit Ray
Screenplay	Satyajit Ray
Based on a story by	Menashi Pramechand
Photography	Somenendo Roy
Editor	Dulal Dutta
Music	Satyajit Ray
Producer	Suresh Jindad

A Devki Chitra Production

Running Time : 135 minutes

In English and Hindi with English subtitles

Cast :

General Outram	Richard Attenborough
Mirza Saijad Ali	Sanjeev Kumar
Mir Koshan Ali	Saeed Jaffrey
Mirza's Wife	Shabana Azmi
Mawah Wajid Ali Shah	Amzad Khan
Adviser	Tom Alter

THE CHESS PLAYERS

Background

Featured at the recent London, Berlin, and Los Angeles film festivals, THE CHESS PLAYERS is the latest film by director Satyajit Ray. A filmmaker of prolific talent, Ray has received at one time or another most of the world's important film awards. THE CHESS PLAYERS is the director's first historical work and follows Ray's long tradition of revealing India's social weaknesses with brilliant satirical wit. Set in 1857 during the final days of the Mogul Empire, the film was adapted from a story by Munshi Premchand. In addition to preparing the screenplay, Ray also wrote the musical score for THE CHESS PLAYERS. For actor Saeed Jaffrey, known to Western audiences for his performance as a sly Indian guide in THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KING, it is his first appearance in an Indian film, playing the part of Mir Roshan Ali.

Synopsis

The setting is Lucknow, India, in 1856. The British are about to take over the final part of the Muslim state of Oudh. Lord Dalhousie (Richard Attenborough), Queen Victoria's governor general, learns that his chief opponent is the king of Oudh, Wajid Ali Shah (Amjad Khan). The king is a musician and poet, no great ruler. Meanwhile, two highborn Indian husbands, Mirza (Sanjeev Kumar) and Mir (Saeed Jaffrey) are playing a game of chess.

At Mirza's home, he and Mir continue their game when a friend comes to visit. The visitor tells them that chess was actually invented by Indians but is played differently by the British. He warns them that the British East India Company is going to take over Oudh. Mirza's wife, to get her husband's attention, pretends to have a headache. When he enters her bedroom, she complains that he no longer cares for her. She also tells him that Mir's wife has a lover, and then tries to coerce him into lovemaking, unsuccessfully. He returns to the chess game.

The following morning, the chess pieces are missing. The two men go to an elderly lawyer friend's home hoping to use his set. Their friend is lying ill in his bedroom while they try secretly to play chess in the next room. Seeing that their arrival has distressed the old man, they leave shortly afterward.

Meanwhile, the prime minister of Lucknow, who has met with the general briefly, and learned that the East India Company is going to take the crown away from Wajid Ali, enters the festive palace and cries to the king about the general's plans. Wajid Ali, to prevent an actual seizure of his throne, issues an order that anyone passing rumors of the company's intentions will have his tongue cut out.

The chess players return to Mirza's home and substitute apples and rocks for the missing pieces. Within minutes, Mirza's wife throws the chess pieces at them from behind the wall. The men decide to play at Mir's house next time.

In the palace, the king worries about losing his throne and sings a song he wrote to his people. He realizes that the company has broken a treaty by

taking the right to dispose of the king. The general, in discussing the situation with a prominent doctor, hopes that the king will renounce the treaty. He tells the doctor that they will annex Oudh regardless.

Mirza and Mir continue their game in Mir's home while Mir's wife entertains her nephew-lover in the bedroom. Mir finds him under the bed but believes his wife's story that he was just hiding from the army. To avoid the army also, Mir leaves with Mirza to continue the game in a mosque outside of the city.

The general visits the queen of Oudh, the king's mother, hoping she will convince her son to renounce the treaty. She refuses and says she will go to Queen Victoria of England to find justice, and if necessary, she will oppose the general with force. The king, after meeting with his mother, decides it best to meet the general with no resistance.

Mir and Mirza are outside of the village. Unable to find the mosque, they continue the chess game in the house of a young boy who is out waiting for the British to come.

Wajid Ali Shah meets with the general and peacefully gives up the crown. In the chess game, Mirza, realizing that he is losing, informs Mir that his wife and nephew are lovers. Mir, in a rage, insults Mirza's family and then shoots a gun at him, just skimming Mirza's sleeve. The boy returns, bringing word that the king has abdicated.

Mirza and Mir, with hesitation, continue their chess game.