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DEVI (THE GODDESS)

EDWARD HARRISON

PRODUCER, DIRECTOR AND SCRIPT:

SATYAJIT RAY

PHOTOGRAPHY: SUBHRATA MITRA

CAST: CHHABI BISWAS, SOUMITRA

CHATTERJEE, SHARMILA TAGORE

Working in a movie industry which ranks high in quantity of production, Satyajit Ray has been India's first director to turn out anything resembling a universal film. His internationally lauded Apu Trilogy ("Pather Panchali," "Aparajito," "The World of Apu") represented a sharp departure from standard colloquial Indian entertainment, and brought him into conflict with the authorities of his country, where tradition is no joke. "Devi" (The Goddess), his fourth film to reach U.S. shores, arrives here only by the grace of Prime Minister Nehru who ordered the lifting of an export ban levied by wary censors, who thought the movie presented an unfavorable aspect of Hindu religion.

The story, based on a theme by Tagore, is laid in Bengal a century ago. A wealthy landowner and devotee of the mother goddess Kali has a vision that his young daughter-in-law is a reincarnation of the deity. The girl, troubled by the father-in-law's belief, nonetheless allows herself to be installed in a shrine and worshiped. Her husband, a student of rationalist persuasion, begs her to flee with him to the city, but when a sick child is made well, apparently because of her influence, she is unable to depart. The cult expands all over the countryside and the "goddess" sits every day in her shrine, longing for her lost human life. Ultimately she is called upon to save the life of a beloved nephew, fails, and with the failure goes mad.

Of this melancholy and exotic material, Ray has made a film that has something of the beauty and pace of the classical Indian dance, now quickly darting, now suspended in time. American audiences, accustomed to high-powered editing and relatively rapid story development, may grow restless with the freezing and friezing of characters before the camera, but they should be held by the visual imagination of the picture, by the unfamiliar glimpses of Hindu life and religion. From the opening shot of an enormous effigy of the enigmatic Kali to the closing frame where the insane heroine, hair bedraggled, face streaked with kohl, flees like a dusky Ophelia into the morning mist, the movie is magnificent photographically.

If in technique, "Devi" is a blend of two worlds, philosophically, it is more Western. Its psychological explanation of religious possession and self-deception bears a kinship to such European movies as "The Miracle" and "Day of Wrath." The kinship is natural enough. People get around these days.