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MOVIE REVIEW

'Thunder': War Clouds Over India

BY KEVIN THOMAS

Times Staff Writer

Of all the films of India's great Satyajit Ray, his latest, "Distant Thunder" (at the Los Feliz) is surely the most harrowing.

Several young women are happily bathing in a pond in a splendid idyllic setting when some planes fly overhead, suddenly . . . wrenching us into the 20th century. More specifically, it's 1943, and although those women pay scant attention to the planes, which are something of a novelty to them, they are harbingers of doom. For it is wartime and Bengal will soon be swept over by a largely man-made famine with the already diminished rice supply

begin reserved primarily for the armed forces.

One of those carefree women, Ananga (Babita), is a recent arrival to the countryside. She and her husband Gangacharan (Soumitra Chatterjee) are the only Brahmins in their rural community, and Gangacharan is intensely status conscious, setting himself up as a sort of local sage.

Consequently, when the price of rice begins to rise he at first pays little heed. How high can it go anyway? Besides, what can happen to him and his wife? They're Brahmins, aren't they?

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'THUNDER'

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A film as beautiful as it is stark, "Distant Thunder" initially moves so slowly as to be all but static. It would seem that Ray is lulling us almost to sleep only to catch us up short when the barely perceptible gathering storm breaks at last as the spectre of starvation hovers over the land.

In the face of so dire a crisis, Gangacharan begins to question his values and the caste system itself that until

'DISTANT THUNDER'

A Cinema V release. Executive producer Sarbani Bhattacharya. Writer-director Satyajit Ray. Based on a novel by Bibhutl Bhusan Bannerji. Camera Soumendu Roy. Music Satyajit Ray. Film editor Dulal Dutt. Featuring Soumitra Chatterji, Babita, Sandhya Roy, Gopin-da Chakravarty, Romesh Mukerji. In Bengali, with English subtitles. Running time: 1 hr., 40 min.

Times-rated: PG (some parental guidance advised).

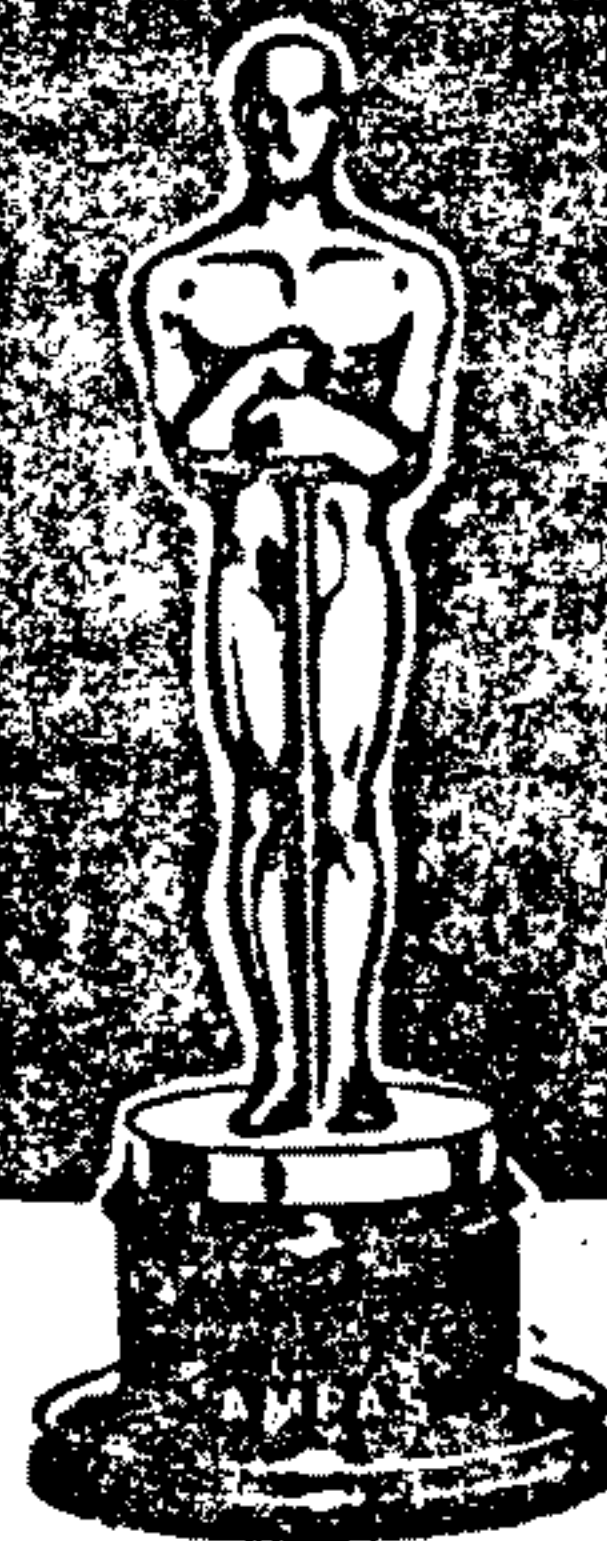
now has always sheltered him so well. Above all, he is made aware that his dutiful devoted wife is as strong and brave as she is beautiful. (Indeed, on another level "Distant Thunder" is a paean to women.)

Ray's imagery has always been striking, and never any more so—or more elegantly stylized—than here. Key images—a sunset behind an immense banyan tree, a pair of butterflies against parched soil, etc.—are repeated throughout the film. How ironic is the spectacle disintegrating into utter chaos amid so much lush Garden of Eden-like natural beauty.

As always, Ray's actors seem to live rather than to perform before his camera. Chatterjee is an extraordinarily versatile Ray regular, and Babita is as talented as she is exquisite.

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