

The Viceroy's House



British Release Poster

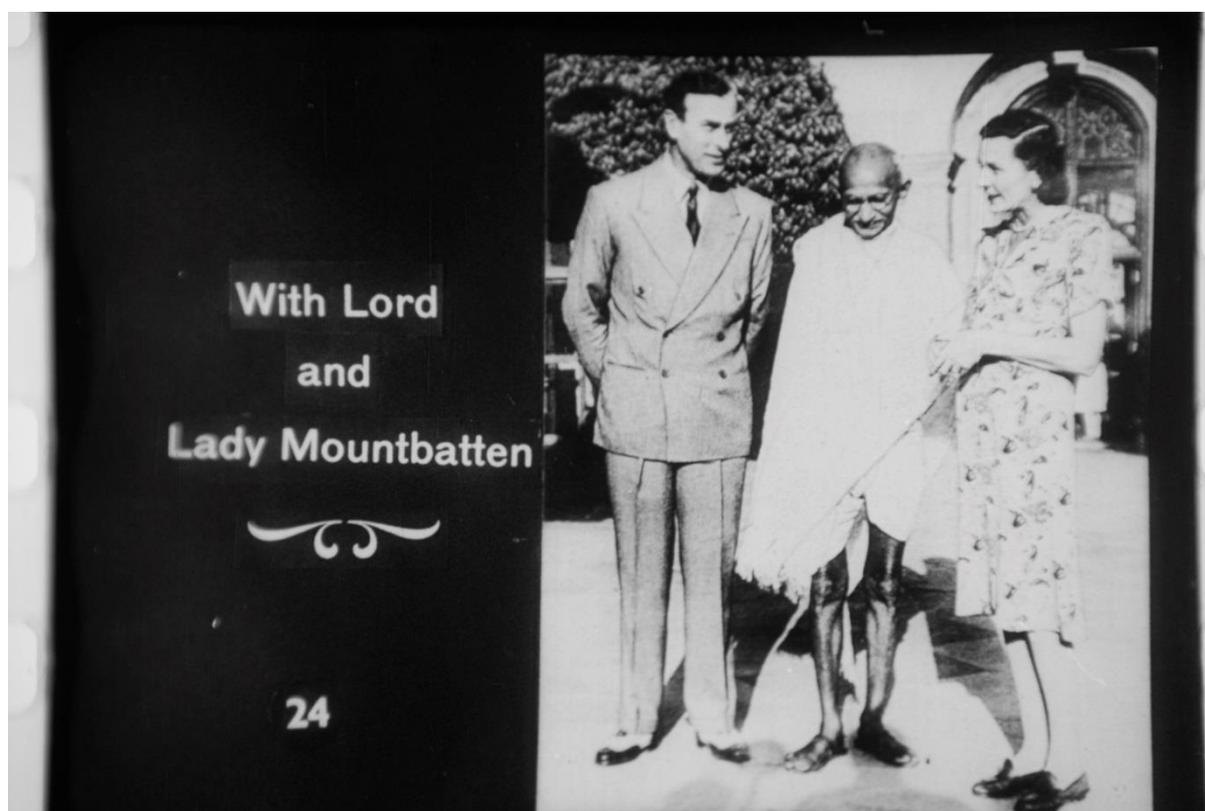
Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Directed by Gurinder Chadra. Produced by Gurinder Chadra, Deepak Nayar and Paul Mayeda Berges. Screenplay by Gurinder Chadra, Moira Buffini and Paul Mayeda Berges. Based on Singh Sarila's *The Shadow of the Great Game: The Untold Story of India's Partition*.

Cinematography by Ben Smithard. Art Direction by. Music by A.H. Rahman with Rekha Sawhney and Anand Bhatt. Edited by Victoria Boydell. Cinematic length: 106 minutes. Distributed by 20th Century Fox and Reliance Films. Production Companies: BBC Films, Pathé and Bend it Films. Cinematic release: February 2017. Check for ratings. Rating 80%.

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Written Without Prejudice



Cast

- * Lord Mountbatten: Hugh Bonneville * Lady Mountbatten: Gillian Anderson
- * Aalia: Huma Quresh * Jeet: Manish Dayal
- * Nehru: Tanveer Ghani * Jinnah: Denzil Smith * Gandhi: Neeraj Kabi
- * Lord Ismay: Michael Gambon * Cyril Radcliffe: Simon Callow
- * Ewart: David Hayman * Pamela Mountbatten: Lilly Travers
- * Aalia's Father: Om Puri * Lord Wavell: Simon Williams
- * Patel: Yusuf Khurram * Sir Fred Burrows: Terence Harvey
- * Liaquat Ali Khan: Anil bhagwat * ADC: Sayed Ahsan: Raja Samar Sin
- * Lady Wavell: Lucy Fleming * Moshin: Sarah-Jane Dias as Sameera
- * Evan Meredith Jenkins: Robin Soans * Miss Reading: Roberta Taylor

Review

The Viceroy's House is a well-made, extremely interesting and fair minded account of the last days of the British raj and the simultaneous partitioning of India. It requires no detailed knowledge of that event and makes what happened clear without being didactic or simplistic.

Director, co-writer and co-producer Gurinder Chadra had close family members involved in the tragedy of partition and she is able to put personal insights and empathy into the partition tragedy without overwhelming her film with personal matters or becoming self-indulgent. The 1947 division of what had been the massive British colony of India into a rump Hindu India flanked by a geographically divided East and West Moslem Pakistan was a tragedy. That 1947 tragedy led to that of 1971, when East Pakistan successfully rebelled against rule by the western segment, and became the separate nation of Bangla Desh. That independence came at a high cost in lives, displacement and misery. The absurdity of one segmented Moslem nation and the unfolding of this future second tragedy, while having its origins in the first, are barely mentioned in the film.

Tragedy enough exists in what is depicted - and what is depicted works at four levels. First and looming over all the other levels in the film, are the masses of colonial India's population, depicted in many scenes of riot, arson and massacre. When these people move, to either India or Pakistan, they move either by choice, fear or force. That process becomes a nightmare of chaos and misery. Without putting the larger forces into the background Chadra works on a second level by personalising this through the romance between a Hindu woman Aalia (Huma Quresh) and Jeet, a Moslem (Manish Dayal). Aalia's invalid father (Om Puri in his last film role) is adamant that she will fulfil her vows in a marriage arranged in childhood and that they will travel back to his homeland. The Moslem-Hindu tensions exacerbate their personal problems. Jeet's role as a Mountbatten's valet serves as a way into the other two levels of *The Viceroy's House* are both located within the palace. The palace staff reflect in microcosm India's increasing tensions: Mountbatten cannot even stop the Hindu-Moslem enmity developing into violence in his own house.

The final level Chadra incorporates into her narrative are the governmental groups and individuals who either inhabit his house or come to it for meetings. These are the people who seemingly will decide India's fate. They have all the trappings of power as the film's British poster indicates. These start with what is very visible, the palace itself, (both its exterior and the interior) the ostentatious power dressing and medals, lines of resplendently uniformed palace guards, the massive staff standing at attention awaiting orders to fulfil any desire. Yet what is very visible is also superficial, for even amongst all this the palace is divided and seethes with animosities. Because they are so evenly balanced and irreconcilable they cannot be controlled.

The film starts in early 1947 with the arrival of the new Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten his wife Edwina and their teenage daughter Pamela, who actually worked as an advisor on the film. Mountbatten has orders to to give India dominion status by June 30th 1948. Essentially British rule must end and Indian government be established. However the Indians are divided. Jinnah, leader of the Moslems wants an independent Moslem state, even if India's Moslems are concentrated in two far apart areas. Hindu nationalists want a Hindu government and Gandhi and his many followers want a united India, based in equality, self-sufficiency and religious tolerance. Mountbatten as viceroy is in a seemingly godlike position with a vision close to what Ghandi wants, but all his tact, sincerity and fairness cannot reconcile the different leaders' aspirations. Exactly the opposite of the divide and conquer tactics which got Britain India, he wants to unite and leave. His situation is worsened by the way Atlee's government sends a civil servant Cyril Radcliffe (Simon Callow) to India to

work on the practicalities of partition: Radcliffe's ignorance about India is actually laughable – at first. His effects in partitioning India turn that laughter into sad regrets.



The Viceroy's house. If this is a house what is a palace? Wikimedia Commons/Flicr

As it turns out the Montbattens, Radcliffe and nearly everybody else in the decision making process are unknowingly on a hidden agenda originating with Winston Churchill in May 1945. Jinnah (Denzil Smith) was one of the few who knew what was really going on. His calm, polite but adamant behaviour, so puzzling for much of the film, suddenly becomes understandable. By knowing of the 1945 agreement he knows that Britain will establish Pakistan to be both a buffer against Soviet Russia and as a guard on the vital Persian Gulf oil trafficking line. To get Pakistan, all he has to do is wait and while he waits, watch what he knows are the hopeless efforts and plans to establish a united India. Denzil Smith's performance, already strong throughout the earlier parts of the film, resonates in the last sections as we realise what we have seen of him before was only a surface act and now we look back and see the subtleties

within the performance. In the scenes where Pakistan's independence is celebrated we see a fox triumphant. While Smith stands out, the whole cast works well in their roles, becoming the characters and avoiding that staginess so common in Hollywood and BBC productions. As Lady Mountbatten Gillian Anderson goes beyond a deft portrayal of the legendary aristocrat: she embodies the type of the British colonial lady in the colonies, every nuance she gives rings true. Hugh Bonneville plays Mountbatten as well-intentioned, dedicated and in a situation nobody could resolve and he slowly comes to realise this: he has the trappings of power but is ultimately powerless to do what he wants. Ghandi (Neeraj Kabi) is in a similar situation. A man vexed by human foolishness but doing his best to overcome it through fairness and patience. Both actors do not overplay their roles, giving a fatalist tinge to the film.

The absurdity of nationalism and religious intolerance is made clear in the division of property in the palace between the two emergent nations: 80% to India 20% to Pakistan even with the spoons? Such implicit criticisms are emerging in the global village – they have a point, even if internationalism is now the ideal of multinationals.

While praising sets and costumes many have criticised the screenplay by Chadra, Moira Buffini and Paul Mayeda Berges. Criticisms centre on historical inaccuracy and a bias towards the British. Basing the film on Singh Sarila's *The Shadow of the Great Game: The Untold Story of India's Partition* the filmmakers do use this book and recently found documents to shape their viewpoint. As for being pro-British, the film's revelations of the secret 1945 Pakistan deal show the British as a major cause of the unfolding trouble. Even so, no British in 1947 India were involved in hacking into people with axes because of the way they worshipped God. That mentality existed before the British took over India, it existed under their rule and it survived them.



Chadra (centre) and cast members at a film festival

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