

Rangoon (2017)



During WW 2 a dangerous love triangle develops between Indian movie star Julie, her producer Rusi Billiomoria (lft) & St. Nawab Malik, (c) Netflix

Director [Vishal Bhardwaj](#)'s Hindi film is set during WW 2, mostly in a Mumbai movie studio and at the Burmese border where British-led Indian troops are fighting the Japanese invaders. For me watching the film is to enter unfamiliar territory, never having seen a film dealing with WW 2 from the Indian point of view. They were divided over their forced participation in what many nationalists such as Gandhi regard as solely Britain's war, so the opening explanatory cards are helpful. Gandhi was advocating non-violent non-cooperation against British rule, but his former ally [Subhas Chandra Bose](#) has broken away from him and adopted violent tactics, even to the point of turning to the Japanese. With their help he had set up the Indian National Army (INA) which was fighting in Burma against the troops loyal to the British. The INA plans to cross the border with their Japanese allies and march on Delhi. But their funds for ammunition need to be replenished. In the opening sequence a Sgt. Nawab Malik (Shahid Kapoor) is captured by the Japanese but manages to escape. He rejoins the British led Indian army but secretly owes his allegiance to the INA.

In Mumbai Miss Julia (Kangana Ranaut) reigns as the queen of Hindi cinema. Skilled at knife-throwing and martial arts, she does her own dangerous stunts in a series of popular action/romantic films. In her newest one she jumps twenty feet from a balcony to rescue a captive woman. The director is pleased to have captured the risky action on the first take, but another figure who has been watching orders him to do it again, declaring that she must first jump to the large chandelier in the middle of the room and then drop down. The director and Miss Julie resist, arguing that the distance to the chandelier is too far, but the commanding figure is Rusi Billiomoria (Saif Ali Khan), the film's producer, so the scene is restaged, with Miss Julie successfully completing the daring stunt. We soon learn that Billiomoria once was a matinée idol himself, his career cut short when he lost his right hand while performing a stunt. He is in love with Miss Julie, though his powerful grandfather is against a marriage because of their caste differences.

The plot really gets under when Miss Julie is told she must go to the Indo-Burma border to entertain the troops, whose morale has been falling due to the many victories of the Japanese armies. General David Harding ([Richard McCabe](#)), an arrogant soldier who loves Indian culture, promises her that she will be better guarded than the King himself. The officer assigned to keep a close watch on her is Sgt. Nawab Malik. Her resentment carries over to him, but we know from a thousand other screen romances that this will change. Which it does after a Japanese aerial attack causes each of them to be separated in the jungle and then reunited when Nawab rescues her from three Japanese soldiers. With the surviving soldier a captive, Nawab and Julie trek through the jungle. Their mutual hostility begins to melt, and during a rainy period spent in a ruined church, they embrace erotically amidst the mud. Eventually they manage to return to friendly territory. But what about Billiomoria? And when she finds out her new lover is loyal to the INA, and not to the uniform he is wearing,

what will she do?

There follows a lot of intrigue involving a Maharaja's jewel-encrusted sword that General Harding had once admired. Because he had insulted the ruler, the Indian ruler has decided to smuggle the valuable weapon to the INA so they can sell it and replenish their meager supply of ammunition. Along with Sgt. Nawab there is an Indian army nurse named Mema ([Lin Laishram](#)) secretly working for the INA. Miss Julie's beloved butler Zulfi (Saharsh Kumar Shukla) also is helping to smuggle the valuable sword because of his desire for India to be freed of the British.

The last section after the smugglers are exposed is a bit hard to accept, though it is certainly exciting. Miss Julie has struggled over her new lover's betrayal of the regular Indian army, but when the General commits atrocities and Nawab is beaten and taken away by a military train, she dons a tight-fitting costume that looks like it was borrowed from a Marvel Comics' superhero and sets off to rescue Nawab and the valuable sword aboard a speeding train. The film's climax at a rope and bamboo suspension bridge high above a river finds the star-crossed lovers in great peril. The INA where they plan to deliver the sword is just encamped on the other side just a few miles away. Pursuing them not only are the General and his soldiers, but the jealous Billiomoria as well, both seeking vengeance but for different reasons. The bizarre twist will leave me wondering because I know in the actual history of the INA that it went down to defeat along with its Japanese ally.

Though I was hoping Gandhi would figure more in the picture, other than the mention of his name at the opening, the film still showed that the situation in India in 1943 was more complicated than most of us Westerners realize. It is hard for us to accept that a seeker of Indian independence would join the Japanese for help, but it is true that many Asians regarded the Japanese invaders as liberators, at least at first. General Harding and, in several scenes he and his

second in command Major Williams (Alex Avery), is shown as brutal as any Japanese officer. The film's denouement is very unGandhi-like, and the statement that the INA was the first to raise the Indian national flag (shown in a brief shot) might mislead Western viewers to believe that the INA was successful—which it was not, its troops captured at the end of WW 2 and many of the leaders imprisoned and put on trial.

The film is thus a mixed affair, its chief weakness being a somewhat muddled script. The several songs and dances that the talented cast perform vary the pace and tone of the film, though with one exception, the songs are not memorable. That exception is sung by Shahid Kapoor's Nawab, "Subh Sukh Chain," a song based on a poem by the great poet/thinker Tagore that served as the anthem of

Perhaps of most interest to viewers concerned with the growth or journey of a character is the relationship between Julie and Billiomoria. The high-born film producer had purchased the teenager Julie from her mother when he saw her perform her knife-throwing act in a street. He has shaped her into a sexy movie star. She has submitted to his directions, but as her fame has grown, a boldness has crept into her character. Upon meeting her Nawab thinks she is just a pretty face with no brains. He asks her why God made pretty girls so dumb. When she rebels, Billiomoria tells her "I molded you," and we think of Pygmalion and Shaw's play based on the Greek myth. When she makes her fateful decision on the bridge, she is very much her own person.

This could have been a far more significant film were it blessed with a better script, but it is still worth watching, giving us a rare glimpse of a war supposedly in the defense of democracy waged by an Empire that denied it to its subject people in the East (not to speak of Africa). But then, we Americans are in no position to call the British hypocrites—not with our policy of placing Black Americans in segregated units, subjecting them to menial assignments (see

the example in the Tom Hanks' naval film Greyhound), and when, after serving their country, denying them their rights back home.

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