

The best film ever made about the British in India?

There are plenty to choose from. A strong case could be made for *A Passage to India*, *Gandhi* and *Shakespeare Wallah*. But for me the answer is...

Carry on Up the Khyber.



A strange choice perhaps? Well, let me defend this decision. This 1968 classic is set at the height of the Raj. A Highland Regiment (the 3rd Foot and Mouth) are guarding the Khyber Pass but their fearsome reputation as 'The Devils in Skirts' lies in tatters (pun intended) when it is discovered that, contrary to legend, rules and custom, they actually *do* wear long bloomers beneath their kilts. Or at least one of them does. Inevitably, a nationalist uprising ensues...

Ok, *The Chess Players* it isn't. But bear with me.

Churned out at the midpoint and the highpoint in a series of over 30 *Carry ons*, this cheap and cheerful film is very much in the tradition of seaside postcards, Music Hall and Panto: lots of double entendres, innuendo, slapstick, cross-dressing and bad jokes.

Culturally sensitive British Comedy at it's best!



Low brow and low budget, *Carry on* films celebrated and spoke to working-class folk who shared their suspicion of authority and gently subversive sense of humour but who also weren't afraid to laugh at themselves. In the *Carry on* world, workers were sex-starved, workshy cheeky chappies. Union officials-self serving. Foremen-class traitors sucking up to management. Those in power (bosses, civil servants, judges) -weak, pompous inadequates. Caricature, parody or stereotype? You pays your money and you takes your choice.

I make no apology for loving these films, even though some (OK, most. Alright, all) are appallingly crass and can make uncomfortable viewing in a world where discussions about cultural expropriation take centre stage. Those made after 1970 get progressively less funny and more tasteless. Or maybe I was just growing up. But their predecessors played a significant and positive part in my childhood. They are my embarrassing uncle. You know the one: Cherished, but you wouldn't really like your friends to meet him. They also made an important contribution to British culture and to the English language itself, giving us, for example the word 'Phoaar!' Admiration, attraction and desire all caught in one infinitely extendable syllable. And let's not forget the final words of Julius Caesar (Kenneth Williams) as he falls to the blades of his assassins in *Carry on Cleo*: 'Infamy! Infamy! They've all got it in for me!' Bet Shakespeare wishes he'd thought of that.

Even among the gems of the golden age, *Carry on up the Khyber* stands out. Through toilet humour the post 1857 nightmare of the tenuous British hold on power in India is explored. But whilst it joyfully mocks the Victorian traditions of Kipling and the Great Game, there is no questioning the right of the British to be there.



Private Widdle and yes, you've got it. The Thin Red Line

This film also captures Britain's conflicted mix of stubborn pride and growing discomfort about its imperial past: British Army officers are dim but decent and brave. Indians (all portrayed, needless to say by British actors variously made up and accented) are divided, devious and as distrustful of one another as they are of the British. The ruler of the Princely State of Kalabar (again, Kenneth Williams) wants to see the British quit India but that's for more self-serving than patriotic reasons. There's a surprising amount of inter-racial romantic activity (but as I've said, we all know under the make-up everyone is really a white Brit so maybe that's not as radical as it might sound) but precious little across class barriers.



An entirely convincing group of South Asian characters

This film sees the Raj as every other *Carry on* film sees the world: from a decidedly working-class perspective. It is thus less about Brits and Indians than it is about the rulers and the ruled. Where power and authority comes from, who has it and why? How its maintenance is so often based on belief not fact and thus how quickly it can be undermined. The massive con-trick of Empire and the debilitating working class tension between distrust and awe of those in power. It's all here. Am I reading too much into this? Very possibly. I have no doubt it's makers would be amazed and bemused that anyone could see anything more in this film than another profitable romp in a very successful franchise.

It may be childish stuff but it is also unpretentious and unselfconscious. It is a film which at the time deeply offended at least one member of the Royal Family because of its lack of deference. Even twenty years after its release the BBC decided it was inappropriate viewing during the first Gulf War because of its disrespect to our boys in uniform: subversive credentials far more serious artistic endeavours would envy. And it has had a lasting effect on me. For the past half a century I cannot hear the word 'Tiffin' without sniggering.