Next program: These notes are being prepared a month in advance, and at this time the new schedule is not available. There is no show next week, and we recommend you devote Monday to seeing "The Phantom" at the Cinematheque screening; the new schedule, for programs beginning Monday September 7th, will be in the mail next week.

August 27 1970

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Telling it like it isn't: two viewpoints on India

"STORM OVER BENGAL" (Republic, 1938) Directed by Sidney Salkow
Produced by Armand Schaefer; Screenplay by Dudley Walters; Camera, Ernest Miller; 2nd Unit Director, Yakima Canutt; special effects by Howard Lydecker, edited by William Morgan; 6 reels

"Storm Over Bengal" is a model of how to make a thoroughly expert pocket "Bengal Lancers" or "Gunga Din" on a "B" budget, and come up with a class-A production all along the line. Cast, camerawork, sets, most certainly the vigorous handling of action — all of these more than transcend their "B" category. The wonder is that Republic, having made such a good-looking little film, didn't pad it by a reel to go after the better playing time. Although even as a at a reel, its merit were realized and it roped in a lot of better-than-average bookings. This print is slightly trimmed for tv, but only about five minutes are missing — and all I can recall specifically as having been deleted are occasional montages of Yakima Canutt's stuntmen leaping into the saddles of their horses. Patric Knowles, having played the weaker brother in "Charge of the Light Brigade", is here elevated to Full Flynn status, with Richard Cromwell in the brother slot. Douglas Dumbrille happily repeats his evil villainy from "Bengal Lancers", and Yakima Canutt shamelessly doubles for Knowles in the climactic action scenes, most of which were shot right in Hollywood itself, in Bronson Canyon.

"CHANDRA LEKHA" (Gemini Productions, India, 1948) Produced and directed by S.S. Vasan; Story and scenario by the Gemini Story Dept., Music by S. Rajeswara Rao and E. Shankar Sastry; Camera, Kamal Ghose and P. Ellias; 9 reels
With Raj Kamal (Chandra Lekha) and Radha (Veer Singh), Benjan (Sasank), Krishnanna Chari (The King), Sundari Bai (Sundari), Kereayan Rao (Circus Manager) and Naski (Gypsy Girl).

In 1948, easily India's biggest, most expensive, and most commercial successful motion picture, "Chandra Lekha" was pure home-grown DeHille, based on legend and fact, but successfully disregarding it in favor of showmanship. It's a colorful, naive, zestful and quite wonderful film in which the overall ingenuousness quite disarms criticism of plot absurdity or occasional production shortcomings, such as the too-obvious studio "exteriors". (The only local criticism was of its, by Indian standards, excessive sensuality. But don't be alarmed — or excited — since those standards are VERY rigid!) Since we are seeing tonight, fully subtitled, is of the U.S. release version prepared by Hoffberg Productions, which was, alas, a dismal flop. (Other imports, bought and paid for, such as the delightful "Aladdin's Lamp", a marvelous swashbuckler, never even got out of the screening rooms). It is edited, and the footage deleted is quite considerable; yet when Cinema 16 played this shortened version some 15 years ago, I had only just seen the full version at Eastman House, and I honestly couldn't pinpoint any specific missing scenes. Indian movies, like those from Latin America, start filling up long running times and providing something for everybody, from comedy and action to song. All of the action and all of the songs seem here to remain; what is gone are the lengthy periods of repose between the action or musical highlights. The film is certainly tightened, perhaps given the too-breathless construction of a serial feature-version thereby, but I can't feel that its basic values are seriously impaired. The action has gusto and size, the songs are a joy, and the music unsubsurd ranges from unexpurgated Wagner and Spanish flamenco to traditional Indian. I think my favorite moment however occurs, as the very beginning: when the king, at the palace, with his troops, the prince strides through the palace, up stairs, along corridors, ever followed by a tracking camera which records the sumptuous splendor of it all, until he reaches his inner sanctum — where he sits down on a very moth-eaten second-hand chair and tugs off his boots! Incidentally, the amusing imitation of Hollywood extends even to the trademark, the plump little Gemini twins who, on this print, appear after the end title. On all the Indian ads, the caption that accompanies the trademark reads (translated): "Whenever the bugles blow, there's a great show!" With its fights, dances, blood, elephants and a circus, "Chandra Lekha" was a huge popular success, the first Indian film to be equally successful in both Tamil and then in Hindi versions.

William K. Everson