



***Sonar Kella (The Golden Fortress)* is a prospective LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library. Below is Kino Ken's review of the Angel Video dvd release of that film.**

**11 of a possible 20 points = \*\*1/2 = average movie**

**India 1974 color 120 minutes subtitled live action feature fantasy  
Government of West Bengal Producers: Government of West Bengal**

**Key: \*indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance  
(j) designates a juvenile performer**

**Points:**

- 1 Direction: Satyajit Ray**
- 1 Editing: Dulal Dutta**
- 1 Cinematography: Soumendu Roy**  
**Stills: Nemaï Ghosh and Sandip Ray**
- 1 Lighting**  
**Special Visual Effects**
- 1 Screenplay: Satyajit Ray based on his own novel *Sonar Kella***  
**Music Recording: Samir Majumdar**
- 1 Music: Satyajit Ray**  
**Playback Singers: Ramjan Ammu, Mohini Devi, and Siddiqui**
- 1 Art Direction: Asok Bose**

**Makeup: Ananta Das**

**2 Sound: J. D. Irani (studio) and Anil Talukdar (location)**

**1 Acting**

**1 Creativity**

**11 total points**

**Cast: Soumitra Chatterjee (Pradosh Mitter a.k.a. Felu),  
Santosh Dutta (Lalmohan Ganguli a.k.a. Jotayu),  
Siddhartha Chatterjee (Tapes Mitter a.k.a. Topse),  
Kusal Chakravarti (j) (Mukul Dhar), Sainen Mukherjee (Dr. Hemanga Hajra),  
Ajoy Banerjee (Amiyanath Burman), Kamu Mukherjee (Mandar Bose),  
Santanu Baghchi (j) (Mukul 2), Harindranath Chatterjee\* (Uncle Sidhu),  
Sunil Sarkar (Mukul's father), Siuli Mukherjee (Mukul's mother),  
Haradhan Banerjee (Tapes's father), Rekha Chatterjee (Tapes's mother),  
Asok Mukherjee (journalist), Bimal Chatterjee (Advocate), Santi Chatterjee  
(eating man in the compartment), Nema Ghosh (photographer), others**

**Another minor film in the Satyajit Ray catalog, this one is an adaptation from the director's own detective story. It's supposedly aimed at a child audience, but it's altogether too gory and complicated for such inexperienced viewers.**

**The plot concerns a six-year-old boy who sees in his dreamlife a golden fortress inside of which he lived in a previous life. This becomes an obsession, keeping him awake at night and interfering with concentration on school studies.**

**In order to determine any merit in the lad's contention about being reborn into contemporary India, his father enlists aid from a parapsychologist. After questioning the dispassionate child and taking copious notes about his answers, the specialist decides to take the youngster to Rajasthan, which seems to fit details of Mukul's dreams better than any other location. The two of them can explore surviving forts there.**

**This proposal sounds fine to Mukul. Surprisingly, his parents agree to it and off go dreamer and interpreter to the western desert province.**

**News of this odd turn of events appears in a Calcutta newspaper. Two readers of a felonious disposition, enticed by descriptions of multi-colored gems in the "golden fort" decide to kidnap Mukul and use him as a guide. This scheme**

backfires when they instead lure a neighboring Mukul to accompany them, only to find their prisoner knows nothing of any hidden treasure. He does, though, acquaint them with the current whereabouts and travel plans of the genuine Mukul. Doping their informer into unconsciousness, they drive him off by car to some dropoff at a distance from their digs. They leave their victim abandoned there at the side of a road.

Eventually, the “wrong” Mukul is found and returned to his family. Word of what occurred reaches the father of the “true” Mukul, who is then worried into contacting private investigator Felu. Explaining the situation to him and his teenage sidekick Topse, Mukul’s father successfully intrigues the famous sleuth into taking on the case.

Boarding a westbound train, the two Bengalis find themselves sharing a compartment with bestselling detective mystery writer Lalmohan Ganguli, who uses the pen name of Jotayu. *Tintin* enthusiast Topse has read some of Ganguli’s books and a three-way conversation ensues, with Felu being entertained by the author’s lack of background information about places he’s used for settings. Ganguli, for his part, is amazed at the powers of observation and store of precise facts the real detective has memorized.

The villainous partnership of Burman and Bose, serendipitously is riding west on the same train as Dr. Hajra and Mukul. Bose accidentally spots them and is told by Burman to ingratiate himself with Mukul through magic tricks. He is also charged with tricking the doctor into believing he is a world traveler.

Later on, having departed the train and begun exploring, the foursome climb a steep hillside path at Nahargarh Fort in Jaipur. Bose causes Dr. Hajra to fall behind Mukul and Burman in order to linger on a supposedly magnificent view of surrounding landscape. As the doctor approaches a stone wall for a closer look, Bose pushes him over it and down a cliffside, leaving him for dead.

Except he’s not. Just badly bruised and more than a trifle confused.

Left in the care of an evil-minded duo, Mukul accepts the lie Dr. Hajra is a “bad man” who has mysteriously disappeared. However, he retains a disconcerting habit of referring to this “bad man” at inopportune times in mixed company.

Felu and his companions overtake a preceding trio in the town of Jodhpur, where all six travelers stay at the Circuit House. Bumbling Burman has registered under the name of Hazra, a spelling error which will later alert Felu to

his masquerade. Realizing at the very least a professional bodyguard is now attached to Mukul's entourage, Burman directs Bose to plant a scorpion in the hotel room occupied by Felu's group. That murderous plan is foiled, though, when Topse spots the creature just seconds before it would strike his cousin. The film's hero escapes unharmed, though now certain someone is setting death traps for him, someone who wants Mukul kept under his more or less exclusive supervision.

A battered and bandage-swathed Hajra also reaches Jodhpur. Spying on guests at its Circuit House, Dr. H. mistakenly draws the conclusion Felu and conversation partner Burman are working together to pry information about priceless gems from Mukul. In reality, the Calcutta yoga practitioner has wrongly identified Burman as Dr. Hajra. Thus he has no reason to hide anything about the case from him, an openness working to the sleuth's disadvantage.

Suspicion falls soon thereafter on Bose, who foolishly insists wolves, rather than hyenas, hunt in Africa. Any genuine global sightseer who had visited the dark continent would know that to be false. Felu realizes Bose, at least, is a fraud. Burman still puzzles him, though.

As a last desperate resort, the smaller malefactor hypnotizes Mukul and learns the fort's identity. He and his co-conspirator must travel on to Jaisalmer, a place of peacocks and shining gold.

Felu reaches the identical conclusion when he happens to see in a shop display various sandstone items made in Jaisalmer.

Dr. Hajra knows Jaisalmer Fort is their ultimate destination because a police inspector in Jaipur has acquainted him with its history and the helpful fact a significant battle once occurred there. Besides, Mukul had shown Hajra drawings of a Moghul era combat, as well as pictures of camels and peacocks, supposedly drawn from recollections of his prior existence. Camels + peacocks + fighters in medieval armor + desert cumulatively lead to the Thar Desert of Rajasthan and its sandstone fort at Jaisalmer.

With all seekers now headed there, the outcome would seem to depend on which arrive first. Impediments are created by Bose, who attempts to murder Felu on board a train traveling to Ramdevra, and by Dr. Hajra, who twice scatters nails on the roadway Felu's taxi uses to approach a rendezvous point with the Jaisalmer-bound train.

Will an odd assortment of well-intentioned guardians overcome all obstacles and get to Jaisalmer in time to save the life of Mukul?

There are two ways to find out. Read the original Ray story in English translation or watch the subtitled dvd film. Either will be an adventure.

Aside from deplorable English subtitles, which more often through jumbled syntax becloud rather than enlighten, *Sonar Kella* is a watchable, involving movie. True, Soumitra Chatterjee's Felu lacks the magnetism of deductively ingenious Holmes and he travels without a critical canine comrade such as the one accompanying Tintin. Topse's far less interesting than Snowy, being too much in awe of his older cousin to criticize him in any way. While Jotayu is at times quite droll, Ray too frequently makes him utterly ridiculous and totally unacceptable as helpmate for serious crime-fighter Felu.

Despite beginning thunderingly at film opening, Ray's music tends to grow less compelling as events unfold. For Rajasthan night scenes, local folk music displaces Ray's own compositions. This creates a gain in authenticity at the expense of a loss in tempo, temporarily slowing action to tourist level strolling.

Asok Bose's art direction is a mismatch with respect to childhood drawings. A six-year-old Mukul would be extremely unlikely to fashion such highly detailed battle scenes as show up on paper in the movie.

It's impossible for this reviewer to evaluate *The Golden Fortress's* screenplay adequately due to inept subtitling. Dialogue at times sounds artificial and forced. However, that may be due to clumsy translation.

Cinematography is quite satisfactory, though the camel-riding scenes fall far short of those in *Lawrence of Arabia*.

Acting is conventionally two-dimensional, with performers settling for playing types rather than fully-developed individuals. No character grows and develops whatsoever.

Dulal Dutta's editing is leisurely-paced. Coherent, yet unexciting.

Only sound recording, particularly of peacock screeches and train chuggings, attains a level of superior quality thanks to Anil Talukdar's superb location work.

A curious sidebar to Ray's core masterworks, *Sonar Kella* offers little to Western viewers in either entertainment or creative artistry. Frankly, it's too scary at times for preteens and too jumbled, thanks to inept subtitling, for teen

audiences to enjoy. Adults are apt to find it a mixed bag, with acting merely tolerable and technical aspects mostly only middling.

Though Kusal Chakravarti's Mukul Dhar performance was acclaimed throughout India and won complete approbation by director Ray, it pales beside the much more natural and spontaneous one of Santanu Baghchi as terrified, overly trusting Mukul 2.

*Sonar Kella* won the President's Silver Medal in 1974 for the Second-Best Indian Film of that year. It also garnered national awards the same year for Best Direction and Best Screenplay. One year later *The Golden Fortress* was honored in Iran as Best Feature Film for Children and Young Adults at the Teheran International Film Festival.