

# - YBR- Gunga Din (1939) - Production Notes

Sources: AFI Curated summary of production (reaffirmed by cited press sources), Gunga Din featurette on DVD, George Stevens: A Filmmakers Journey (documentary by George Stevens Jr., 'Q&A' from Screen & Radio Weekly 1939, 'George Stevens: The Films of a Hollywood Giant' by Neil Sinyard (Pg. 44-49), 'Cary Grant: A Brilliant Disguise' by Scott Eyman (Pg. 129-133), RKO Radio Pictures: A Titan is Born' by Richard B. Jewell (pg 154-155, 168-), "Gunga Din: From Kiplings Poem to Hollywoods Action Adventure Classic" by William K. Chemerka

Gunga- Hindu for Ganges River  
Din- Arabic word for faith

## Pre-Production

- Origins
  - Edward Small secured the rights for the poem and his company Reliance Pictures in 1936 for £4,700. When Small moved Reliance into the auspices of RKO, the studio thus gained control of the poems rights.
  - At one point amid negotiations involving Rio Rota, MGM tried to use the rights to soldiers three as a bargaining chip to get Rio Rita rights
    - Victor McLaglan
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- Writing
  - Script went through the hands of several writers
    - Author William Faulkner began preliminary drafts before the project was taken to Howard Hawks
    - Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur assumed script duties when Hawks is tapped to head the film.
      - Six weeks of work at the Waldorf Astoria led to no major break in the story until production head Sam Briskin recieved a telegram from the duo and Hawks: "Have finally figured out tale involving two sacrifices. one for love the other for England, which neither resembles BENGAL LANCERS nor CHARGE OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE end contains some thing like two thousand deaths, thirty elephants and a peck of maharajas We have tis now in a cocktail shaker and have poured out some thirty five pages of glittering prose"
      - Briskin reply: "Can t understand your going so far wrong as to write story which does not resemble BENGAL LANCERS and CHARGE OF LIGHT BRIGADE. Are you boys slipping? Besides, when I want something out of a cocktail shaker I don't want prose.

- Hecht and MacArthur draft turned in April of 1937, but casting difficulties put the film on hold, which leads to Hawks making Bringing Up Baby instead
- Hecht and MacArthurs work became the basis for the final draft ultimately credited to Joel Sayre & Fred Guiol.
  - Hecht and MacArthur lifted elements of the plot for THE FRONT PAGE and inserted them into the story
    - The idea of the man off to be married
  - Fred Guiol had worked with George Stevens early on when they were both under the employ of Hal Roach
  - Sayre primarily a novelist who also worked as a screenwriter on films such as THE TOAST OF NEW YORK, ANNIE OAKLEY(also directed by Stevens), and the Howard Hawks film THE ROAD TO GLORY
- When Stevens arrives on the film, its suggested by Sinyard book that Stevens insisted on the two main characters being “ should be increased to three, to permit more comic and dramatic variety”
  - With three weeks before filming, they grabbed what books they could find related to the subject and churned out the main meat
  - Brought in his loyal compadres, Joel Sayre and Fred Guiol
  - Developed the intergration of the Thuggee cult
  - Writers would remain on set finishing their work as filming commenced and proceeded
    - Sayre openly remarked that having the writer on the set as often as he was there was unusual
- Basic Elements from Hawks run remain
- bigger basis in Soldiers Three (also by Kipling)
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- Pandro S Berman is brought in as the new head of production , who in turn selects the notably reliable George Stevens onto the project.
- Director
  - Howard Hawks initially tapped for the directing assignment
  - Hawks dismissal has many varying accounts, but his dismissals seems to tie into the dissapointment of BRINGING UP BABY in addition to Hawks temporarily ditching the studio
    - from RKO Birth of a Titan: “At a meeting on March 17, J.R. McDonough informed William Hawks, Howard's brother and agent, that it would be best if RKO and the producer-director severed relations? Although McDonough would not say so specifically, the studio's dissatisfaction with Hawks was based primarily on the budget overrun on Bringing Up Baby, Also, Hawks was scheduled to direct Gunga Din. a challenging and extremely important picture, and there was no room for a profligate on that production. Howard Hawks was upset by this turn of events- not so much because he was leaving RKO and his \$3,500 weekly salary as

because he would not be able to direct Gunga Din. The film was precisely the type of male adventure saga that he loved best, and he had helped to shape its story. Nevertheless, the deal was canceled upon payment of 540,000 to Hawks.\* This severance money was \$20,000 less than the studio would have paid him if he had been kept on for the duration of his contract”

- Berman assigns Stevens, currently under contract to RKO. His reliability is seen as a way to tame the story which could have gone out of hand and over budget under his watch.
- A condition of Stevens taking on the assignment was that the film have much of primary shooting done outdoors on location
  - This condition in turn increased the budget and lengthened the schedule.
  - The insistence would be an issue with Stevens reputation for the rest of his career and his perceived workability in Hollywood
- Fairbanks said you never felt like you were working for him but rather with him
- Stevens , according to his son, took a script that was more interior occasionally looking out and made it a location sprawling film
- Casting
  - Casting the Title Character.
    - RKO Executives originally wanted Indian actor Sabu Dastagir (Sabu) in the role of Gunga Din, but Alexander Korda refused to loan him out after negotiations fell apart over the refusal to loan out Ginger Rogers in exchange
    - With Berman wanting an Indian actor, Assistant Director Ed Killy was tasked on a mission that took him criss-crossing the US and Canada scouting various communities with Indian and Hindu residents. His most promising hopeful was in Canada with a recent emigre from India, 12 year old Sucha Singh. Despite close calls and near successes, Singhs father ultimately refused to let him travel to Hollywood to be in the film.
      - Father backed out last minute after arrangements were made as late as June 4th of 1938
  - Sam Jaffe
    - Sam recieved telegram in 1938 , per NYT: “RKO Radio wanted him to plane West instanter and go into the water-carrier part without the preliminaries of screen testing. He wanted a new piano, so the idea seemed good and he obeyed.”
    - Per Chemerka: According to Jaffe biographer Arleen Lorraine, Garson Kanin, who had acted on Broadway and directed RKO’s A Man to Remember (1938), one of The New York Times’ ten best films of the year, was instrumental in securing the Gunga Din role for Jaffe. Kanin was familiar with Jaffe, having seen him in The Bride of Torosko (1934) at Henry Miller’s Theatre. Although the Broadway play lasted only a dozen performances, Kanin was so impressed with Jaffe that he urged him to try out for the role of

Kipling's tragic hero. [22] Jaffe secured the part, but he was amused that he had recited the poem years earlier in order to gain entrance to the City College of New York's drama club. "I did the Gunga Din speech and they wouldn't take me," recalled Jaffe. "I thought I was good. They didn't think I was good enough." [23] RKO paid Jaffe only \$11,000 for the title role, which was based on seven weeks and two days of work at \$1,500 a week. The studio also paid Jaffe an additional \$500 so he and his wife could complete a round trip to New York.

- Sam Jaffe was, per press reports, cast based on the strength of his performance as the High Lama in LOST HORIZON
  - per Sinyard and the Screen and Radio Guide 1939 story
- Hopefuls
  - NY Times had Philip Merivale in contention for the lead as Cutter
  - Rudy Behlmer notes that RKO approached MGM to loan out Spencer Tracy, Franchot Tone, and Clark Gable for the film in exchange for the rights to Rio Rita (1929). Mayer agreed to all but Gable, whom he would not part with.
- Search everywhere
  - RKO Talent Scout Marion Robertson on Casting Call (per Gunga Din Prod book): "We made several tests for the officers' parts among the English actors then on Broadway ....We also rounded up an assortment of young Hindus for the title role. The first day the call went out, we fine-combed the East Indian shops and boards of trade [in the New York area.] There was a Hindu colony over in [New] Jersey, but the boys were not the pure Oriental type."
- Cary Grant casting listed as definite by motion picture herald (November 15, 1937)
  - Grant loved the poem since childhood
  - RKO didnt see casting as a risk, but he was aware given his trajectory as of late (Baby) that his me t film needed to hit box office gold
- Victor McLaglen listed in varoety as being cast as of April 22, 1938, but RKO transcription notes point to McLaglen being cast before Fairbanks
  - Borrowed from 20th
- Grant reached out to Doug Fairbanks Jr for his interest in playing a role
  - Fairbanks: "It was Cary's idea for me to be in the picture. He wanted to make it a three-star vehicle. He didn't even have a script at the time — only a draft of the synopsis. He told me he'd play whichever part I didn't want. Cary chose the material first and then worried about the part. That was the secret of his success. Ultimately, we tossed a coin."
    - Berman claimed otherwise, stating that Grant suggested the roles be reversed and that he agreed to do so: "We had written the script for Doug Fairbanks to play the role that Cary eventually played, and Cary to play the role that Doug played. Well, when Cary read

the script, he came in and he said, 'I'd like to do the picture, but I'm not going to do it because I wouldn't dream of playing that flat role. I love the part that you're giving to Doug — the comedy role.'

- Fairbanks: "He explained that such scripted plot as existed so far had been inspired by Rudyard Kipling's Soldiers Three....So I stalled politely and said that since no script existed yet, I'd first read whatever treatment there was before I could give an answer."
- After a newer draft was presented, Fairbanks signed on before even knowing what role he'd play
- Authenticity (?)
  - Hilda Grenier served as technical advisor, wrangling together all information (technical and cultural) surrounding India for the film.
    - Ranged gamut from correct pronunciation (Indian and English dialogue), approximations, architecture,
      - per Chemerka: George Stevens made sure the language was properly pronounced when he provided lines and dubbed dialogue in post-production to such uncredited background performers as Abdul Hasson, Paul Singh, Jasin Ali, and Dalip Singh, among others. They were initially paid \$25 a week, but were later upgraded to \$41.25 a week.
    - Studio sought and found more than seven technical advisors expert in British military and India for the film.
    - Chemerka writes from an article from the NYT in 1939 about objections laid out by Indian journalists regarding the use of British Technical Advisement as it pertained to India:
      - Chemerka: Indian journalists expressed concerns about British Army officers serving as technical advisors. "But why do they seek ex-service men from the British Army as technical advisors when making films about India," remarked Baburao Patel, editor of Filmindia magazine and president of the Film Journalists' Association of India. "The producers would not have to go outside of Hollywood to discover a number of Indians, professors and other cultured people who could give them all the advice they wanted, but still it was Sir Robert Erskine Holland whom RKO engaged as technical advisor on Gunga Din."
      - More from Chemerka: "Another Filmindia writer was even more critical of Holland. "I discovered that the Technical adviser for this picture is a seventy-year-old retired British officer, Sir Robert Erskine Holland, whose chief qualifications for being an expert on Indian culture and customs is that he was for a long time a member of the high-born services in India, one of our rulers, who, after a whole life spent in India, cannot speak two words of Hindustani correctly," wrote Khwaja Ahmad Abbas. [24] The

comment was only a preview of the criticism that was to come from the Bombay-based publication.”

- Sept 6, well into filming, the following occurs speaking on the existence of an actual hero (per Chmerka): “Stevens, Sayre, and Guiol made a few changes to the script on August 31 and September 6. [14] At about the same time, a conversation commenced between Sir Christopher Robinson, Honorary Secretary of The Kipling Society, and RKO about the accuracy of certain historical and cultural details in the film. A letter dated September 4, 1938, that was sent to George Stevens, indicated that the British-based organization confirmed an actual story of an “heroic bhisti name Juma, or Jama,” who had been issued the Star of the Indian Order of Merit for valor. Robinson also raised concerns about the Gunga Din character not being a Brahman, supposedly the only group of Indians who served as water carriers. The Brahman bhistis were recognizable by the “sacred thread” worn over their left shoulder. However, the unsigned letter’s author informed Stevens that “a sect of Hindus in the Punjab, called ‘Jiwars,’ also provide bhistis to British regiments. “I rather wish we had thought of making Gunga Din a Brahman, and had given him the ‘sacred thread’ at the outset, but I fear it is too late now,” added the writer. The letter also suggested that a scripted scene with Ballantine, who was disguised as a native approaching the temple with Gunga Din, was “a severe strain on the imagination.” The scripted scene was never used.”
- Casting of Extras
  - There was not enough, at least so claimed, Indian extras around military age. Thus RKO went to work on seeking out anyone who could visibly pass
    - A notice from Pittsburg Press regarding the film a year late (August of 1939): “All the Hindus, Hawaiians, and other brown-skinned extras in Hollywood” were cast as background for the film “and more than 250 live in the camp.”
    - Book & Jaffe on Extras Placement: Whenever possible, the Hindus were strategically placed before the camera. Jaffe was impressed with the background performers. “You heard their explanations in their native tongue,” said Jaffe, who also appreciated the set embellishments. “There were elephants, mounted Sikhs and Ghurkas, temple bells, and oxen, and so far as I am concerned it was perfect India.”
- Make Up:
  - Hundreds of Caucasian extras were assembled for any given day and its reported that getting them ready ate up a large portion of the \$6,999 makeup budget
    - Per Pittsburg Press article: “Five men at a time are seated on a turntable. The table turns slowly while spray guns spray on a brown make-up. Each day less and less make-up is necessary, for the sun in [Lone Pine, California] is intense, and has given most of the company a natural tan.””

- Jaffe make-up took longer, with a special dye used on entire body that would take 2 hours to remove, longer than time to apply
- Art Direction and Set Design
  - 3 main sets on location with 20 additional sets designed and purposed
    - 3 main location sets were designed before the script was finished
    - Stevens: "It cost too much to move a camp, so we put it all in one place and those various locations all came within a few minutes' ride of one another with our star, Mt. Whitney."
    - additional sets ranged from soundstage to exteriors on Culver City, the studio ranch, and Lake Sherwood
    - The bridge was at Lone Pine
    - Miniatures made by SFX dept. to accomodate difficult shots within the created sets

## Production

- Filming began June 24th, 1938 and completed October 15, 1938
  - Originally to wrap September 3, 1938
  - Additional takes were made thus postponing the December 1938 release originally planned.
  - Budget set at \$1,332,025
  - negative cost after filming were \$1,909,669.28
- Went into filming without a finished script
  - Film during the day, crank out the script at night
  -
- Started with the scene of Gunga discovered by Cutter
  - Worked out on the day
- Filming took 104 days, 75 of which were on location
  - Everything seemed to be over schedule from day 1, with every concern or issue being raised amid active production
  - Scenes shooting one day would break and then resume the following day within the action
    - action sequences specifically what Stevens Jr. Designated as the cavely improv
  - Fire broke out at 10:30pm on first night decimating an entire block of the Trantapur village
    - loss of \$5 grand
    - Jaffe on fire: "We had a bucket brigade. The next day, in the newspapers, who was given credit for putting out the fire? The three stars. In truth, it was the extras who served as firemen because Stevens wouldn't risk the lives of the stars."
- Stevens Recollections
  - Stevens on first day at Lone Pine (per Book): "The horrible day finally arrived when we got on location up at Lone Pine but had nothing on paper," said Stevens. "So we started with a big parade-ground drill. We didn't have enough

horses, and one of the advisors — a sergeant major — told me they used to drill on foot. I knew it would take a good four hours to get this drill organized.” In those hours, Stevens worked with Sayre and Guoil to create a scene in which Grant’s Cutter confronts Jaffe’s title character, who is drilling nearby with his bugle. “The scene was scribbled out and the script girl passed out the three necessary copies, one for herself and two for the actors.” It may have seemed to be a rush job, but Stevens wasn’t too concerned. “I don’t worry about the dialogue until the time comes, and that time is when the actors are on the set ready to speak those certain lines.”

- Stevens on first big fight scene at Village with the trio: “It required an awful lot of shooting — lots of setups and explosives — and it took me longer to shoot than anybody imagined. It took me, I suppose, ten days to shoot it, setup after setup, and it gave Joel Sayre and Freddie Guoil and me time to try and figure a third of our way through the story so we could move ahead.”
- Locations
  - Stevens said they designed the sets before even beginning the script rewrites
  - Stevens, unsatisfied with Yuma landscapes sought out by RKO location manager, began to involve himself in the locations search
  - Scenes in village attack with water shot following the return from location at Lake Sherwood
  - Village built by studios in Sierra
    - After built and dressed, fire broke out. Put out with various means. Full block destroyed along with many props
    - Lloyds of London paid off reported losses, the biggest loss in 16 years
    - Rebuilt in ten days
  - Stevens Jr relayed that the cast and crew were living on location in cold evenings and over 100 degree heat in the day
    - Whole encampment of tents shown in home movies
  - Area flanked by the Sierra Mountains in California, of which contained Mount Whitney
  - Temperature on location barely got below 100 degrees
  - Alabama Hills, a narrow valley in California, served as the location for the Khyber Pass
    - Douglas Fairbanks Jr states in an interview (DVD) that when traveling he met Indian people who were convinced that the scenes were actually filmed on the Khyber Pass in Northwest India
- Jaffe on Extras per book: Whenever possible, the Hindus were strategically placed before the camera. Jaffe was impressed with the background performers. “You heard their explanations in their native tongue,” said Jaffe, who also appreciated the set embellishments. “There were elephants, mounted Sikhs and Ghurkas, temple bells, and oxen, and so far as I am concerned it was perfect India.”
- Fairbanks was among those who wondered why there would be comedy amid the more serious tone



- Stevens Jr. says father referred to the ending as Calvary Style Improvisation. Spend days and days shooting great battle
- Opening sequence was trimmed in re-release
  - Even in original release, it was scaled back
- The Delays
  - Berman realizes by July that the film is growing over budget.
  - Memo to Stevens from Berman Aug. 5: "It seems to me from the film I have seen to date that the element of mystery attached to the various opening sequences is terribly affected, and that not knowing just what is going on is going to be a lot more interesting to the audience than to have seen the opening episodes, in which we give very clearly away to the audience what all the shooting is all about...The picture is running somewhat over schedule in budget, which is of great concern to us all on account of general conditions, but the film looks good," wrote Berman. "And I am hopeful that now that you are acclimated and have been through the early half you will be able to make much better time from here on."
  - Decided to go up and talk to George about it. Waited for George to come down from the tall structure. Never got down. When he did, he drove off avoiding Berman
    - Story per Chemdraka book: Stevens continued to go over budget, and Berman decided to pay his director a visit on the set. Stevens had been filming during the day and writing at night. "I was looking forward to finishing the day, and then having Sunday off," said Stevens. "I had sent somebody ahead and got a cabin up the road at Big Pine, back in the hills about four miles, where I could go when I finished work — flee from there, pull myself together a little bit, and come back Monday morning. All of a sudden, I see a studio car drive in while I'm making the last shot. I'm coming down to go to my cabin, and it's Pandro. I say, 'How are you, Pandro?' and get in my car and leave." Berman was surprised at Stevens' quick exit, but expected him to return. Fairbanks recalled the moment differently. The actor said that Stevens had received a memo from Berman directing that the filming be suspended. "We knew we were on to something good [making the film], so I said, 'Let's just pretend we didn't get the message.' We tore it up and went on working." Berman had a different take on the incident. "I was waiting for him at 5:30 [a.m.] Monday morning when he got back, and I said, 'Look, you've got x-number of days up here on location with this enormous crowd, and if you don't finish by then, George, you're just gonna have to come home without the rest of the stuff,' " said Berman."
    - Tracked him down and confronted him 5:30 monday morning. Gave him the last days. Managed to finish on time miraculously
  - When Most principal photography ended, Stevens was able to get more out of the budget following a rough cut. As American Cinematographer noted: "In September, a

rough cut was assembled and shown to the studio executives. Only the climactic battle and some post-production work remained to be done. So impressed were the officials that they decided to authorize another two weeks of shooting at Lone Pine to permit the battle to be filmed on an even larger scale than was envisioned originally.”

- Grant to the rescue: per Chemerka: Near the end of principal photography, Grant reportedly “blew up when George Stevens ordered him to stay over another day or two” after McLaglen had developed a black eye in a fight, which “prevented him from working in scenes with Grant that day.” Grant came up with an idea. He proposed that Stevens proceed with the scene because the camera could be re-positioned without showing the bruised side of the actor’s face. “Stevens followed Grant’s suggestion exactly, saving RKO the \$10,000 it would have cost to cancel production for the day.”
- Opening Credits
  - Gong at beginning created by optical effects wiz at RKO , Linwood Dunn
    - Behlmer: Accomplished by reflecting the letters into a pan of mercury which gives the ripple effect
- The Final Battle
  - Stevens on pre planning: “The job was to use 1,500 men, several hundred horses and mules — to say nothing of four elephants — most effectively for scenes of utmost confusion, and still plan the action to obviate accidents and possible injuries. To do this, we first fought on paper the entire battle, the charge, and the headlong retreat of the Thugs. [We] rehearsed the cast in small detachments and in ‘slow motion’ until the mechanics of the action were established. Just beyond the range of the cameras were posted first-aid facilities as well as wranglers to capture frightened, riderless animals.”
  - Second Unit over seen by cinematographer Frank Redman
  - Shot in the first weeks of autumn in the Alabama Hills
  - 2000 extras used for the scene
  - October 14 saw Gunga Dins climb to the top of the temple
    - Stunt Man Bryan “Slim” Hightower for shots when Gunga almost falls after losing his grip and then when he ultimately falls
  -

#### Post-Production/Reception/Legacy

- One of the first films released during the beginning of George Schaffers time at RKO
  - Pandro S. Berman still on board for creative decision making on the West while Schafer dealt with the money men in the East