India Comes to the Big Screen
Category : October/November/December 2005
Published by Anonymous on Oct. 01, 2005

MOVIES

India Comes to the Big Screen

BAPS volunteers faced extraordinary challenges in producing IMAX film to promote India's magnificence

Kalyani Giri, Houston, Texas

From the snowy splendor of Mount Kailash to the wild jungles of Sunderbans, from the towering minars of mosques to the hand-sculpted 12th-century Rameshwaram temple, the majestic grandeur of India is the backdrop against which the documentary presentation Mystic India is set. Making its USA debut in Houston at the Museum of Natural Science Wortham IMAX theater in April, Mystic India details movingly the extraordinary true story of a boy yogi's solitary journey in search of spiritual enlightenment.

Produced by the international socio-spiritual organization Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS), the documentary won the Audience's Choice Prize in January at the Tenth International Large Format Film Festival held in La Geode, France. The project, a brainchild of BAPS spiritual leader and humanitarian, His Divine Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj, was created to portray the diversity of India in an educational, informative and entertaining film which would appeal to audiences globally.

The first large format film ever made on India, Mystic India has already played to critical acclaim in Paris, Singapore and London, where the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall attended the Royal World Charity Premiere. The narrative of the English language version of the film is by legendary thespian Sir Peter O'Toole.

Set in 18th-century India, the film traces the path of 11-year-old Neelkanth (played by 10-year-old Latesh Patel), who, leaving his home town of Ayodhya in Northern India, traverses barefoot and alone 8,000 miles over India's often treacherous terrain without food or money in hand. Neelkanth's journey from 1792 to 1799 is one of steely resolve and survival against all odds. When he reaches Muktinath, where an ancient temple of Lord Vishnu stands surrounded by 108 waterspouts (pictured below), Neelkanth performs severe yogic austerities, undeterred by adverse weather conditions. He grows up to become a great Hindu spiritual leader, Bhagwan Swaminarayan, founder of the movement that today bears his name.

Mystic India was produced in IMAX large- format film (15-perforation 70mm, ten times larger than a standard 35mm movie frame), which achieves images of incredible sharpness that can be projected on screens up to eight stories high. This special format also made it a challenging and expensive project, as it was filmed at over 100 locations with a cast of 45,000 volunteer extras. It took 570 production volunteers, who put in over a million man-hours, propelled by their desire to see this exemplary production to fruition. Armed with historical manuscripts, scriptwriter Kamlesh Pandey crafted the original Hindi script. After interviewing nearly a hundred large-format professionals, BAPS entrusted the task of directing the film to veteran director Keith Melton. He, along with director of photography Reed Smoot and writer Mose Richards, captured India's marvels on film--colorful festivals, exquisitely sculpted temples, churches and mosques reflecting the diversity of religion and culture; the depth of spirituality symbolized by the unique rites and rituals; the extreme contrast of Kerala's lush paddy fields and Rajasthan's hostile deserts.

BAPS President Southwest Chapter Vikram Patel feels the documentary vindicates India of the negative view portrayed by Western media: "They're always showing India as mired in misery and poverty. The film gives a wider view of her cultural legacy, arts, spirituality." BAPS Public Relations Coordinator Keith Patel was elated with the turnout. "Every weekend we have sold-out bookings. At most showings, mainstream viewers comprise around 35 percent of the audience." Latha Thomas, Director of Marketing at the Natural Science Museum, described Mystic India as a "crowd pleaser."

I asked Jayesh Shelat, spokesperson for BAPS, what the greatest challenges were in making this film. He responded, "Over 11,000 screen tests were performed to find the right child to play Neelkanth. Scouting teams travelled 22,000 miles in search of ideal locations. Crews and cast filmed in the freezing Himalayas and scorching deserts. The toughest challenge was filming the cast of 8,000 in the Rath Yatra

scene."

To watch the trailer and find out if Mystic India is playing near you, visit http://www.mysticindia.com. Proceeds will benefit the many charitable and humanitarian endeavors that BAPS Care International undertakes.