Video and Audio Reviews
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Praying With Anger. Produced, directed and starred by M. Night Shyamalan. 1993. 101 min. Crescent Moon Pictures, Ltd. Whitehall Offices, Suite 12, 410 Lancaster Ave. Haverford, PA 19041. Airing regularly on many US cable stations.

This super film is an intensely realistic, unexaggerated portrayal of the identity crisis a college-aged Indian-American student experiences during a year of schooling in India. Shot almost entirely in Madras, the bold, emotionally-charged script, written by Shyamalan, explores the self-searching many of us second-generation Indian-Americans go through-especially when we try to find our roots by going "back home" to India, which never really was our natal home at all.

When Dev arrives in India, he stays with a host family who have a daughter and son his age. But the parents, teachers and fellow-students view him as an outsider, a cultural misfit, a lowly American troublemaker. Granted, he makes some huge blunders like approaching a female student from behind and tapping her on the shoulder to initiate a conversation with her. Nearby students look at him totally shocked. And, at the temple, his awkwardness and ignorance of protocal and the basics of Hinduism are embarrassing. But the big twist-and why I think this movie is so good-is that Night turns the tables around and exposes some of India's uncultural underside. Something we hate to be shown. For example, we witness one of the most cruel, still-sanctioned school customs, ragging. Dev is made to do cruel and humiliating things and even told by his host roomate Sanjay to go along with it even though it's sick. Dev goes through turmoil of conscience not knowing what is right-to go along with something he feels is wrong, or give in to fit in.

In a skin-tingling nighttime scene, we witness Hindu/Muslim animosities erupt into murderous passions in the streets. Dev saves the life of a Muslim student-the one who ragged him the most-about to be torched by a vengeful Hindu crowd. So we begin to see that Dev, though not born in India, has culture-the purest kind that comes from the soul.

Dev also comes to terms with his unresolved feelings toward his late father in a really mystical scene where he visits his father's natal home. His father appears in his astral body and Dev feels a love from him he never felt while he was alive.

The forces of love and duty are carefully studied as Dev finds himself attracted to a beautiful classmate, Sabitha. Sanjay warns him not to get obsessed with her as she has a strict family and would not welcome his advances. But it is Sabitha who breaks his heart, by telling him just before he leaves that, though she really likes him, she will let duty comes first and let her parents choose her husband.

The title of the movie is explained in the end when Dev concludes that when Indians pray, they are very intense, and when they get mad, they are equally passionate about their anger. Interestingly, volatility of the passions is a strong undercurrent through the whole story. This film is for the whole family, but especially for us SGIAs, Second-Generation-Indian-Americans. (See interview in sidebar below.) *VC

MADHVACARYA In Sanskrit with English subtitles. 150 minutes, color. US$19.95 plus shipping and tax. Available from: ITV Productions LTD, PO Box 556 Topanga, CA 90290 Tel: (310) 559-7100.

This Hollywood-quality production employs high-powered cinematographic artistry to capture the life story of the 13th-century, Vaishnavite revivalist Madhvacarya. A vigorous exponent of dualism, he argued and wrote prolifically that the soul and God are fundamentally different. This placed him in opposition with prevailing Shankaran Advaitic schools that preached Aham Brahasmi, "I am Brahman" -God and soul are essentially one. But so impassioned and persuasively did he articulate and debate his view, he converted many to his bhakti-oriented teachings and is today credited as the father of the dualist school.

Assuming the story line is reasonably accurate, Madhvacharya's soulful interest was not attacking another philosophical school but bringing a fresh wave of spiritual regeneration at a point in time when monistic Vedanta had apparently become too rote, ingrained, intellectual and institutionalized. It had drifted too far away from the purest and most spontaneous experience of God as love and divine joy.

This captivating video also reveals the many lesser known sides of this saint. He was an accomplished grammarian, a linguist, composer and musicologist. From boyhood to his ascent and recognition as a revered spiritual leader, we get to glimpse into that period of time. We watch this youth growing up around a temple, in a traditional gurukulam and later, take up the life of a wandering monk. He loved tirthayatrai, pilgrimage, which allows for memorable footage in the breathtaking Himalayas. I thoroughly enjoyed being transported back in time and living for two and half hours in this fascinating era of Hindu history. *TK

HUM Aapke Hain Kaun? (1993) 3 hrs. Stars Madhuri Dixit, Salman Khan. Hindi. Produced by Rajshri Pictures. Directed by Sooraj Barjatya. Playing now in theatres everywhere.

This flic is the rage all over India. The story runs like a variety song and dance show, full of bright costumes, pretty girls, clever boys, food, romance, tragedy, spirituality and God, who saves the day! 70% of the movie is about getting beautiful Pooja married, and all the tugs and pulls, swooning and crooning, giggles and wiggles that romance invariably invites. But all the great traditional values of duty, sacrifice, family and devotion and love are there sublimely reflecting the spirit of Hindu dharma throughout.

The directors, the Barjatya family who own Rajshri Pictures, are bhaktas of the Holy Mother in Pondicherry and their family-oriented themes always make their films an uplifting experience. *VC

Gopaal Krishna (1980) 3 hrs. Starring Sachin, Zarina Wahab. Produced by Rajshri Pictures. Available at Indian video outlets.

This classic is a staple in my family's VCR diet, the perfect introduction to the life and leelas (divine dances) of Krishna. But be aware-if you are not used to watching mythologicals, you may find the sets and costumes garrish, the music sometimes contrived and the histrionics outrageously melodramatic. That said, this is still a really good movie! You will find yourself transported blissfully to Krishna's heaven realms. *VC

RAJMOHAN GANDHI: ENCOUNTERS WITH TRUTH

Directed by Clare Gartrell Davis. 40 minutes, color, 1991. US$395 or rental, $65. Available from: Filmakers Library, 124 East 40th St., New York, NY 10016, (212) 808-4980

Encounters With Truth presents a new voice for the vision and legacy of Mahatma Gandhi, "Father of India," that of his grandson, Rajmohan Gandhi-author, journalist and parliamentarian. Rajmohan shares his efforts to provide the bridge to apply the values and methods of his grandfather and the enormous challenges facing India today-poverty, subhuman housing, pollution, the almost-institutionalized government graft and corruption, communal violence, caste abuse, and loss of faith. While probably too expensive for your home library, it is a precious new resource for schools, libraries and temple societies. *TK

CASTE AT BIRTH Written, directed and produced by R. Mira Hamermesh. 52 minutes, color. US$79.95 (For schools US$445.) Available from: Filmakers Library, 124 East 40th St., New York, NY USA 10016, (212) 808-4980.

Award-winning filmmaker Mira Hamermesh explores India's caste system focusing on the untouchables, or harijans, "children of God," as Gandhi called them. Much of the film is shot on streets, on trains and inside shanties, listening to harijans explain their outcaste identity and how they cope with the humiliations or fight to overcome them.

One segment shows social activist Swami Agnivesh trying to lead harijans into a prominent Hindu temple in New Delhi. The first attempt was blocked. The second

attempt led to everyone's arrest. "We were shocked because the Government promised the harijans the right to go into the temple."

Swami Agnivesh makes the point that whereas the apartheid system of South Africa imposed suffering upon 22 million black Africans, and Indians-and attracted international censure and condemnation-over 150 million "untouchables" suffer in India under a more oppressive social system than apartheid, and no one seems to care. The movie shares that in some parts of India, "untouchables" would tie a broom around their waist so that their polluting footsteps are swept away as they walk. In other parts of India they would wear a bell around their neck so that those of higher castes are alerted to their desanctifying presence. In one scene, a young harijan translates a song by14th century singer/saint Tulsidas that says, "Women, untouchables and drums are meant for beating." This young man converted to Buddhism.

KALAKSHETRA Directed by anthony Mayer. 49 minutes, color, 1991. US$39.95 plus US$4 for shipping and handling. For the rights to public showing, US$119 plus $4 for shipping and handling. Available from: Centre Communications, 1800 30th St., Suite 207, Boulder, CO 80301. Tel (303) 444-1166.

As a reader of Hinduism Today over the years, you've probably read about Kalakshetra, the wonderful institution created by Rukmini Devi to preserve and promote Indian dance, music and culture. So, as familiarity breeds interest, you'll definitely want to see this video. Much of this superbly-crafted film is of conversations with Rukmini Devi, students and teachers, hearing personal testimonies and anecdotes about their life there and future dreams. I was surprised to learn that Kalakshetra has its own elementary and secondary school providing a general education for younger students at no charge. Kalakshetra tries hard to not be exclusive. Students come from many backgrounds, communities, castes and faiths. Nevertheless, a Hindu Sanskrit prayer starts the day at the group assembly, and the mood, food, dress and atmosphere are overwhelmingly Hindu. The current principal, Bhovana Venkataraman, says ultimately she wants Kalakshetra, "to create very beautiful humans who are considerate, kind and radiate happiness-universal citizens who really contribute to peace!" *TK

Audio Review

The Jungle Book (1993) by Dissidenten. Released by Triloka, Inc. 1327 Abbot Kinney, Studio B, Venice City, CA 90291. Available in most record stores.

This super-contemporary CD features the music of the Karnataka College of Percussion Music masterfully reveling in a sophisticated fusion of East and West. You'll love the thodi ragam mix with the hard-driving techno-rhythm in the title track and the trance-like ambience in "Maharaja's Ox-Cart," which is actually a modern rendition of Raghupati Raghava Raja Ram. The track "Light of Love" takes a 90s spin on bhajan Govinda bolo hari Gopala bolo, Radha raman hari Govinda bolo. Take note-the proceeds from CD sales go to the Save the Narmada River Project. *VC

Sidebar: Producer Profile: M. Night Shyamalan

It was 3:45am on a snowy night while I was munching on popcorn, watching for the fourth time the intense movie Praying With Anger when I suddenly realized that Dev, the movie's young star (right), was also the producer! Prepared to get the run-around from Spike Lee types, I called Crescent Moon Productions the next day and was greeted very warmly by the familiar voice, M. Night Shyamalan. He told me right away that a lot of the emotional mosaic and dual-cultural conflicts of the movie were drawn from personal experience. "But plot-wise," he assured me, "none of it was true. Like my father is still alive. But alive or not, I still find a need to prove myself to him." I got up my courage and asked him if the Sabitha heartbreak thing was from first-hand experience. "Oh, yeah, I have been dumped," he laughed. "I have gone for women who were unreachable and all that, but no, Sabhita's character really represented India, what I found in her was pure, traditional. She was willing to sacrifice for her beliefs. There was that strength in her." Interestingly, Night, only 23, was recently married in real life to a Sindhi psychologist working on her PhD. His mother is quite religious, and he says that since the huge success of his first film, his mother has been doing more pujas in thanksgiving, mostly to Goddess Devi.

Night studied at New York University Film School and made this award-winning film on a shoe-string budget of $750,000. Already Hollywood is courting him in a serious way. His newest screenplay, Labor of Love, is so emotionally compelling it has caused bidding wars among major film companies.

I told him I liked the way he so sensitively handled Hinduism in the movie, especially the totally riveting scene of the female sadhu excorsizing a ghost. "Well, I wanted the movie to have an edge of magic," he responded. "One should experience the extraordinary, mystical, Hindu side of India. I may lose some Westernized righteous people, but religion is such a huge part of life to the Hindu. Dev was lost. He had no where to turn so he went to the core of India, and he found Ganesh. And he found himself." I thanked him for his time and for the film which helped me to find a part of myself. *VC